Exciting Adventures

ARGOSY

RED STAR MAGAZINE 11-29

NOV. 29 Every Other Wednesday 10¢

VENI VIDI-Vichy

NAZI TERROR MEETS MURDER

MAX BRAND
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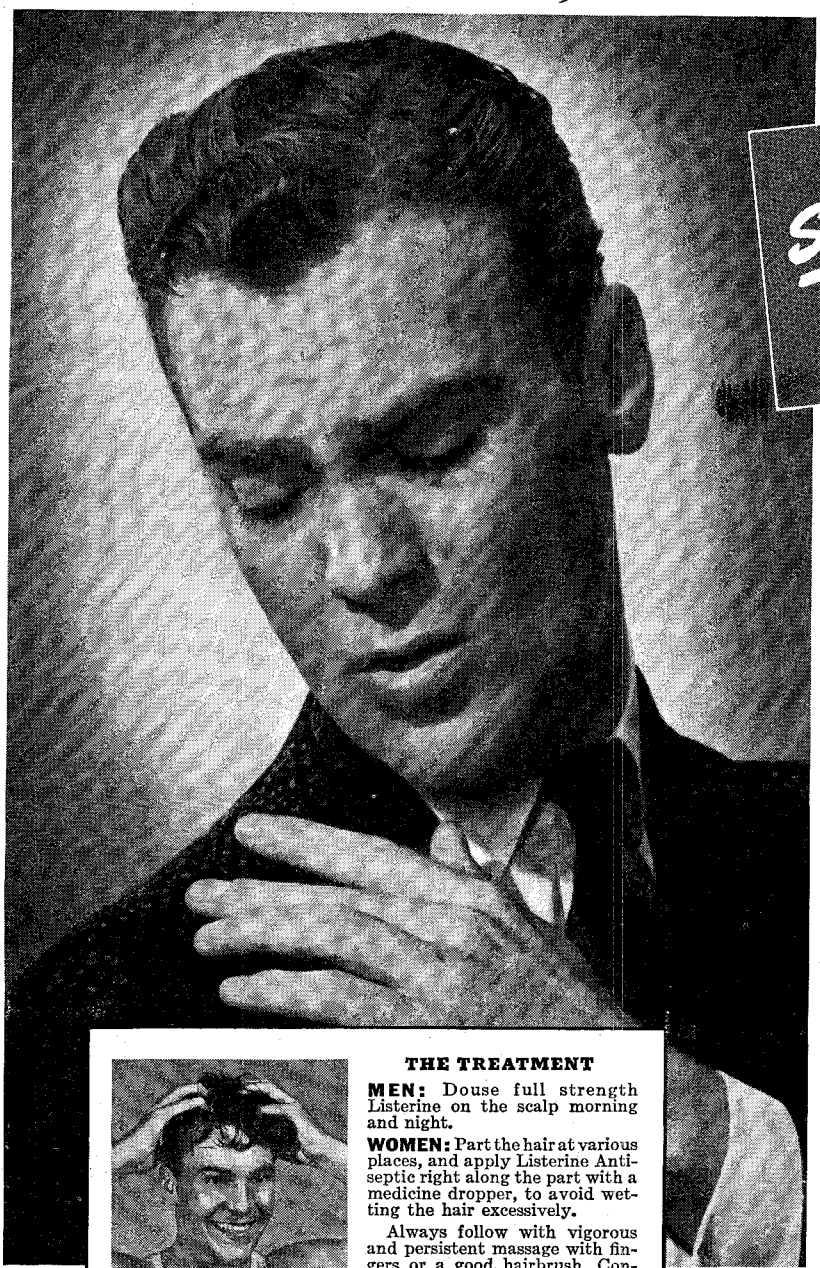
A "back-seat driver"
gets your goat . . .

infectious dandruff gets it faster!



START NOW with LISTERINE

WHAT makes the infectious type of dandruff so annoying, so distressing, are those troublesome flakes on collar or dress . . . and the scalp irritation and itching . . . that so often accompany the condition.

If you're troubled in this way, look out—you may have this common form of dandruff, so act now before it gets worse.

Has Helped Thousands

Start right in with Listerine Antiseptic and massage. This is the medical treatment that has shown such amazing results in a substantial majority of clinical test cases . . . the treatment that has also helped thousands of other people.

You, too, may find it as helpful as it is delightful. Listerine is so easy, so simple to use, and so stimulating! You simply douse it on the scalp morning and night and follow with vigorous and persistent massage.

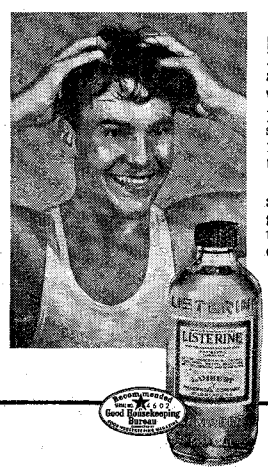
Thousands of users have marvelled at how flakes and scales begin to disappear, how much cleaner and healthier their scalps appear. And remember:

Kills "Bottle Bacillus"

Listerine Antiseptic kills millions of germs on scalp and hair, including Pityrosporum ovale, the strange "Bottle Bacillus" recognized by many outstanding dandruff specialists as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

This germ-killing action, we believe, helps to explain why, in a series of tests, 76% of dandruff sufferers showed either complete disappearance of or marked improvement in the symptoms of dandruff within a month.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo*



THE TREATMENT

MEN: Douse full strength Listerine on the scalp morning and night.

WOMEN: Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic right along the part with a medicine dropper, to avoid wetting the hair excessively.

Always follow with vigorous and persistent massage with fingers or a good hairbrush. Continue the treatment so long as dandruff is in evidence. And even though you're free from dandruff, enjoy a Listerine massage once a week to guard against infection. Listerine is the same antiseptic that has been famous for more than 50 years as a mouth wash and gargle.

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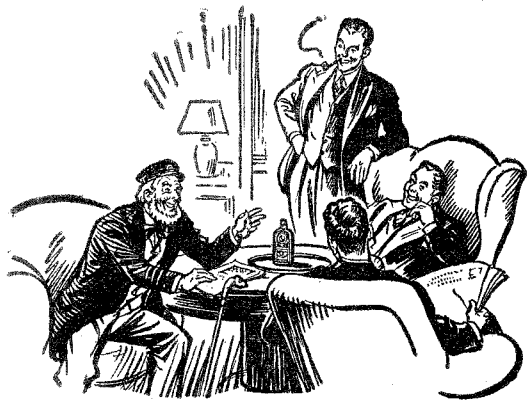
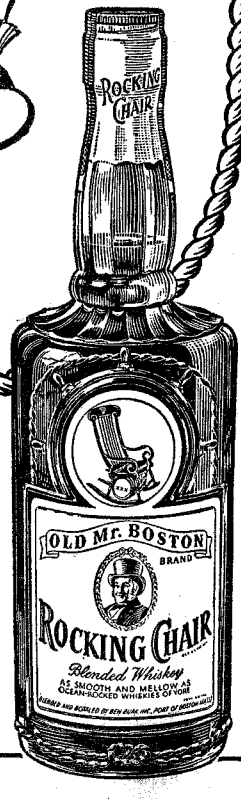
RETIRED FROM THE SEA, these wise old salts "rocked the keg" as faithfully as ever — with a rocker replacing the briny deep! Mr. Boston took a leaf from their log! The *Rocking Chair Whiskey* he brings you today was inspired by famous "rocked" whiskeys of days gone by.



MR. BOSTON RECAPTURES the forgotten mellowness of whiskeys "rocked in the keg" *through controlled agitation in his special process of blending.* Land or sea, you never tasted finer whiskey than *Rocking Chair!* Get a bottle and port your helm for solid enjoyment!



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ROCKING CHAIR

BLENDED WHISKEY

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 311 | CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 29, 1941 | Number 5

Looking Ahead!

ASSIGNMENT IN GUIANA

Welcome to Georgetown, Lane Morgan. For all its exotic, tropical colors, this city seems thoroughly modern and civilized, and it is—civilized enough for suave peril, international intrigue, and murder. Before your job is finished, you'll have plenty of chance to use your wits, your fists, and your gun. Beginning a baffling and exciting mystery novel by

GEORGE HARMON COXE

HIGH IRON ROLLING

The train's on schedule; the signals give her a clear track; the night operator is on the job. Yet disaster rides the rails tonight, and a man must learn to read a new and sinister timetable if he's to keep the specials highballing. A dramatic novelet by

WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES

PERIL IN THE PACIFIC

In five years the Philippine Islands gain their long-sought independence. But do the Filipinos want it now? Or do they fear it, knowing that the steel hand of Nippon will reach for their islands as soon as they stand alone, unprotected by Uncle Sam's might? Here is the answer, vividly and authoritatively set down by

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This magazine is on sale every other Wednesday

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DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

The man, a well-known explorer and geographer, tells how he found these strange methods in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. He discloses how he learned rare wisdom and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which enabled many to perform amazing feats. He maintains that these immense powers are latent in all of us, and that methods for using them are now simplified so that they can be used by almost any person with ordinary intelligence.

He maintains that man, instead of being limited by a one-man-power mind, has within him the mind-power of a thousand men or more as well as the energy-power of the universe which can be used in his daily affairs. He states that this sleeping giant of mind-power, when awakened, can make a man capable of surprising accomplishments, from the prolonging of youth, to success in many fields. To that eternal question, "Do we have to die?" his answer is astounding.

The author states the time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world, and offers to send his amazing 9,000-word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 103 E, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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Give Me Ten Men

By Charles Marquis Warren

Author of "Lo, the Tattooed People!", "Forward into Battle", etc.

A great football player, Tip Hollbrook had been, and a great guy; he'd had the world in his pocket. But his pocket had worn thin, somehow: Now he was down to a bum ankle, a broken spirit, and a place on the sidelines. And just one other thing: a coppery-haired hero-worshiper who hadn't forgotten him

CHAPTER I

SMILE FOR A BROKEN HERO

IN THE dressing room under the stands the roar of the crowd above could be heard only faintly; yet it was not a soothing sound. Tip lay flat on his back on the trainer's table in the center of the floor, waiting for Specs Ambler, the trainer, to get around to taping his ankles.

Brassy music drifted in. That would be the Spartan band, a hundred and twenty-five pieces maneuvering smartly under the arc lights. There was very little do-or-die college spirit in the professional racket, but the crowd got a show.

Sandy Sanders, Spartan captain and right end, passed by and stopped to look down at Tip Hollbrook.

"How are you feeling, Tip?"

Tip pushed up on his elbows, feeling the rankled uneasiness that always came when they inquired after his health.

"Listen, do I look like I'm going to die? Let it go, will you?"

Sanders frowned. "Okay, Tip." He went away.

Tip let his shoulders fall back to the table. You waited a long time for attention from the trainer when you were a second reserve. It was lonely waiting, and it provided too much time to think back to when you didn't have to wait because everybody's first concern had been you.

The smell of oil of wintergreen was sharp and clean. He lay still, feeling physically rested and limber, and completely dead inside.

Specs Ambler came up and glanced down at Tip's bare feet.

"The right one, Tip?"

Tip sat up, glaring.

"What the hell do you mean, the 'right one'?"

Ambler shrugged.

"No offence, Tip."

And then McFadden made his lunge, and the ball was no longer in Tip's arm, but bounding forward crazily

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Tip lay back, mollified. "Both of them," he said casually.

He saw Norton, the club's doctor, moving among the players.

"Do the right one first, Specs," Tip said quickly.

Jumping Joe Harmon came over, his cleats making a sharp clicking on the cement floor. He was fresh out of Colorado University, the first All-American Colorado could lay claim to. He was tough and young and arrogant with that fear all rookies brought along the first time they tried to make the jump to the big league.

Tip conceded him to be all pile-driver. He had to be. They were bringing him along to fill the vacancy left by Tip.

Jumping Joe said amicably, "How's that right ankle?"

"What's it to you?"

Jumping Joe grinned, embarrassment coming on his young face.

"A lot. If that ankle holds up maybe I won't be in there so much this season."

Tip's face turned red. "You forget about my ankle, rookie. You keep your mind on your playing. If you're half as good as you think you are you won't have to worry about my ankle."

Jumping Joe's face instantly clouded. It was never any good, Tip thought, kicking away what little confidence a rookie really had. He saw the uneasy good humor slipping from the big rookie's face, saw the sting that came to the face, saw the anger and resentment and lack of assurance there.

"Nobody, including you, needs to worry about your ankle, Father Time," Jumping Joe said through the twist of his lips.

Tip sat up, feeling cold inside, kicking Specs Ambler away from him.

"What did you say?"

"There's nothing the matter with your ankle. The doctors haven't been able to find anything wrong with it. The X-rays don't show a thing. The trouble with your ankle is right there"—he slapped his own belly—"where your guts ought to be."

"Don't go away, you—" Tip pulled furiously with his legs. Specs Ambler took a firm hold of them, looked up and said, "You want to tape these ankles yourself?" He looked at Jumping Joe. "Go sit down," he said.

Jumping Joe turned away, his cleats making a hard grating sound.

Tip watched him and then sank back, feeling the coldness inside and trying to make it go away by thinking of other things.

The Spartans were playing Brooklyn in the opener tonight. They wouldn't need his toe tonight and there wasn't much left of him beside his toe. He hadn't started a game last season, but he'd helped win a couple of close ones, providing three points from fifty yards out when the seconds were ticking off.

He guessed that was why Lance Ellenger, the owner of the Spartans, was keeping him on. And maybe out of sentiment. Tip had hitched the Spartans to his belt and galloped to four championships when he'd been fresh and the years were kind.

SONNY TALBOT, second string quarter, loomed over the table, his ugly face grinning pleasantly, his head nodding on his huge shoulders.

"You about ready, Tip?"

"You can see for yourself."

There wasn't any use barking at Sonny. He and Sonny had played at Atlantic together, the first time the University's team had received a Rose Bowl bid. They'd been together ever since. It didn't do any good jumping down Sonny's throat; he wouldn't be fooled.

A referee stuck his head in the door.

"Five minutes, Andy."

Andy McKinney—the coach—nodded, looking around, his harsh eyes contemplative.

"Quiet down," he growled to the room in general. "What do you think this is?"

That was funny, Tip thought. The coach sounded like the boss of a road gang. He had in mind how Tad Cody, venerable coach at Atlantic University, had coddled the team before a game. It was a long way, he thought, from there to here. Eight years was a long way.

Last season Atlantic had let Tad go. For no special reason. He'd been around seventeen years; maybe that was too long. He'd caught on then with the Philly Eagles, who weren't doing any too well.

Dr. Norton's bony face appeared over the trainer's table as Ambler finished his taping.

"You want me to take a look at the ankle, Tip?"

Tip looked at him, growling, "Who said it needed an inspection?"

Norton grimaced. "You had enough trouble with it last year. If it's still bothering you, then you'd better do as I told you last season."

"I know. Go to a big shot medico. Maybe have it busted and re-set. No thanks, doc. You're good enough for me. And I haven't the time or—" He got up quickly, casting about for his shoes. He was flushing. He'd almost said he hadn't the money. It wasn't good policy for a player in this league to admit he was broke. "Where are my shoes?"

"In front of your locker where you left 'em," Sonny said. He grinned and turned away. Doc Norton also turned away.

The referee's head appeared again.

"Two minutes, Andy."

THEY ran out onto the runway and down the steps and out onto the field, the team with their headgears on trotting tightly toward the twenty-five yard line nearest the clubhouse, the squad flowing toward the bench and blankets.

There was a long rippling roar as Sandy Sanders and Ace Parker met in midfield for the toss.

Tip had a glimpse of Lynn and Lance Ellenger as he shrugged into his brilliant gold-and-scarlet windbreaker, drew the hood over his head and draped a blanket about his shoulders. They were in a first-base pavilion box, near the forty-five. There were about eight in the party. They looked very smart in their high hats and evening hoods.

Lynn didn't wave and that wasn't good. It wasn't good when your wife didn't wave.

Ellenger made a friendly salute and nodded.

Somebody in another box did lift her arm. He stared to make sure he was the recipient of her wave. She was the girl who came out to watch practice each day, who knew football and who called Tip Mr. Hollbrook and seemed to remember him when he hadn't been a number

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among the Spartan reserves on the Spartan programs.

He waved briefly and out of the corner of his eye saw Lynn turn in her seat to see who it was.

He took a good look himself. The girl was standing up, appraising the Dodger team across the field.

She couldn't touch Lynn's beauty, of course; but she was no slouch in looks. He liked the way her hair, coppery with tiny golden splinters through it, went back from her forehead in real waves and covered her ears. But Lynn's coiffure was smarter, exposing her small ears and dropping straight to her shoulders in a swanky sweep about her neck that made the girls who sang in the night spots ugly and unsexy by comparison.

The girl's figure was something else. He'd noticed it during the afternoons when she'd been the only spectator in the park. It was ripe with that youthful ripeness which comes to girls between eighteen and twenty-three and which only a gifted few managed to retain after that age. Lynn, he had reflected with pride, was one.

He let his eyes move again to Lynn and then sat down, hunching forward on the bench. The sight of his wife, looking very lovely and unattainable, had again started the scrimmage in his chest.

CHAPTER II

ONCE A CRIPPLE—

THE park was quiet with tense anticipation. Jumping Joe was going to kick. Sandy Sanders was teeing the ball. A whistle sounded and was at once lost in the pandemonium loosed from the tiers.

Sam Francis scooped up the bounding ball on his goal line, picked up his waiting interference on the ten and ramrodded to the twenty-five before Sanders and Marchant, Spartan center, brought him down.

The Dodgers came briskly out of their huddle. From the bench Andy McKinney and Tip yelled in simultaneous warning.

Ace Parker was racing around the right side of his line straight into a gathering phalanx of Spartan tacklers. Some of them saw Parker slip the ball to Pug Manders who was going in the opposite direction. They flowed over Parker, chased in to make the kill and spilled Manders five yards behind the line of scrimmage. The crowd howled its approval and—along with the Spartans—didn't see Banks McFadden sweeping far and deep around the end Parker had originally traversed, until the Dodger back was out in the open and straightening up and sprinting.

The crowd shrieked and then gasped and was silent. McFadden reversed his field and sped diagonally across the stripes. He was fast as a rabbit.

Cal Gillette, Spartan quarter and safety, nailed him along the sideline on the Spartan forty-five. The park caught its breath in relief and began to hum.

Tip shuddered. A chestnut like a triple reverse, and it had gone for thirty yards. It would probably take the Big Gold the better half of the first quarter to get back those thirty yards.

But the Spartans didn't get anything back. Pitt power had become a gridiron tradition under Sutherland and it began to look from tonight's display as if his Dodgers were carrying on with the same bruising type of ground-gaining football that distinguished Jack's collegiate backfields.

Between them, Pug Manders and Sam Francis cracked the Big Gold's line almost at will, and McFadden and Parker capped them with end-sweeps until McFadden finally ran it over from the five.

Reliable Ralph Kercheval came in from the Dodger bench and added the kick from placement and it was 7 to 0 with the first quarter not yet completed.

Tip groaned. When the Gold line finally got on to these power plays, Ace Parker and McFadden would be there with the answer: passes over the head of that Gold line. It was as simple as that.

Andy McKinney knew it too. He put Larsen, rollicking robust Swede from Wisconsin, in at full and told him if anything came through the guards or tackles he personally would dock a hundred bucks of the Swede's salary.

Then he called Tip to him.

"We're flustered out there, Tip. A veteran can give us balance, calm us down, steady us. You go in there."

Excitement fought down the surprise that came to Tip as he picked out a helmet. The first quarter of the first game and he was going in. It didn't matter under what circumstances.

McKinney's cool voice said, "You think your ankle will hold up?"

Tip turned to him quickly. He couldn't detect any sarcasm in the harsh expression of McKinney.

"It'll hold up."

THERE was no ovation. Tightening his headgear strap under his chin as he ran, Tip noted this and the pain it brought was not sharp. Not so long ago they wouldn't have had to consult their programs to find who Number 12 was. They'd have known and they'd have shrieked.

Stocky little Cal Gillette received the kickoff, came up behind Tip, halted and shot a lateral the width of the field to Harmon; and Jumping Joe galloped forty yards with it to the Brooklyn thirty-five before Pug Manders knocked him out of bounds.

In the huddle, Gillette said, "You feel like lugging it, Tip?"

"I'm no cripple, if that's what you mean," Tip said. The quickest way to get ridden out of this league was to begin accepting the other guys' concern for you.

Gillette frowned. "You take it, Joe," he said to Harmon.

Jumping Joe, grinning, dragged half the Dodger line on his back for seven yards before they rubbed his face in the turf. Gillette, behind Tip's interference, got three around end and it was third and one and the park came alive with excitement and relief.

Tip moved into the huddle, planting his feet hard against the ground to detect the first signs of the pain in his ankle. Hell, he thought, I'd better pay attention to the game and let the ankle go. If it comes, it comes. There's nothing I can do about it.

Gillette called for Tip to take it from close T formation through center.

Tip stared at him. This was what McKinney had sent him in for: to soothe these men, letting his experience cushion the rash decisions they might make under heat.

"No," he said. "Not through center, Cal. They're mad and they'll come tearing through there. Cross 'em up with a reverse or pass."

Cal Gillette looked at him. "I'm calling 'em, Tip."

"Listen, they're expecting it through center—"

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"The trouble with your ankle," Joe told Tip, "is here, in the belly, where your guts ought to be."

"Your ankle beginning to bother you, Tip? Those guys over there look too big to pile through with a bad ankle?"

Tip felt the rush of blood to his face.

"Give me that ball!"

They moved rhythmically out of the huddle and he heard Gillette's brittle voice calling signals.

The ball was snapped and there came the tearing of bodies thrown against and past each other, the labored quick breathing sounding unreasonably loud, the short exclamations men make when they put their minds as well as their muscles to a tough thing to do.

Tip got going as the ball brushed his fingers. Svendson, the Dodger center, caught him before he had reached the line of scrimmage. When he tried to crawl, Svendson and Golemgeske pushed him back six yards.

He got up slowly, tentatively planting his full weight on his ankle. It held.

It was fourth and seven. Gillette and the others were looking at him.

A substitute came in and reported to the referee. The referee turned and said, "You're out, Hollbrook."

The crowd was silent as he trotted to the bench. Andy McKinney looked at him and looked away, having nothing to say.

Out on the field Cal Gillette tried a pass but this time the Dodgers expected it and it failed.

Tip restrained an impulse to turn on the bench and look at Lynn. He wondered what she had thought when he muffed it out there. He wondered what she had said to Lance Ellenger.

FOR the rest of the half the Dodgers played the Spartans off their feet. The huge throng, in the unexpectedness of deep disappointment, sat in stony silence in the deep shadows of the tiers.

He followed the squad off the field, walking slowly, and as he came out of the runway under the bleachers a hand tapped his shoulder and he turned. It was Lynn.

"How do I look, darling?"

The breath went out of him in an admiring rush. She had taken off her cape so that he could get the full effect. An overhead light caught the dark bangs over her forehead, seeming to turn them from black to sunny brown, and made a glossy patina on the locks which fell sheerly to her nude shoulders.

She had on an evening gown of gold lame which shimmered at the spots where the light caught the full curves of her body, accentuating them. Over her arm she carried the evening cape, of scarlet velvet with an ermine collar.

There was a chill to the September air and she put the cape on. She smiled at him, pirouetting daintily.

"Will do?"

He didn't answer. He grinned. He wanted to put his arms about her waist and pull her to him. He started to.

"You're the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

She evaded his mouth, bending her head back. She laughed and quickly disengaged his arms from her waist.

"You're dirty, Tip! You'll muss me. You won't be proud of me if I'm mussed."

It was as if he had been stung.

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"Where are you going dressed like that? I thought you and I were going to spend a quiet evening tonight, take in a late movie, a beer and go home."

"Darling, Mr. Ellenger has asked me to go to the Aster House after the game. He's giving a party. It'll be so much fun. You wouldn't want to deny me that, would you?"

He looked at the dress and the cape, his forehead wrinkling.

"Did I pay for those clothes?"

A warning annoyance made the light in her gray eyes appear silver.

"Please, Tip. We've been through all that. Don't let's start all that."

"Your clothes allowance is seventy-five dollars a month. That's a week of my pay and pretty generous. But it wouldn't pay for the collar on that cape."

He caught at a fragmentary hope. "Did you charge them? We'll get into trouble if you did. "You know we aren't allowed to charge at any store until I pay—"

"Of course I didn't. I'm fully aware of the state your credit is in." Her chin went up defiantly as if she meant to get this unpleasantness over with. He knew what was coming and stiffened himself as if for the impact of a head-on tackle.

"Lance made me a present of them, of course."

"It's 'Lance' now?"

"Yes, 'Lance'. Mr. Ellenger. Your boss. Your owner."

HER words did not bring the pain of a sharp blow. It was like being hit on old scar tissue: the shock was there and he could sense it, but the scar itself was numb.

His voice was quiet.

"I won't stand for this, Lynn. I've put up with your seeing Ellenger because I've been so broke and he can take you places and give you good times that I can't. But when you accept these 'presents'—when you turn me down for an engagement with him—you're going too far. I've got my self respect, and I won't stand for any more of it."

"No? If it weren't for me you'd have been dropped from the club last year. You know that."

He knew it. That was probably the real reason why he had let her be seen in public with Lance Ellenger. A tide of shame at his own inadequacy rose within him. When he'd been getting a cool thousand dollars per game—

"Naturally I can't play like I used to," he said. "With my ankle the way it is . . . " His words trailed off. He couldn't go on about his ankle to her.

"Your ankle! Lance has spent more than you make a season to discover what's wrong with your ankle. And what has anybody found? No, Tip, everyone but you knows you're through as a player. The only place where you can fill in is that horrible little McDowell School in Maryland. At two hundred a month!"

Her laughter was suddenly light and chiding.

"The reason you're retained with the club is because Lance Ellenger prefers my company to anyone he knows. He realizes you can't afford the life I want, and he can. He doesn't do it behind your back. You should be grateful that I hold your job for you and that Lance Ellenger is a gentleman."

Before he could say anything, Lance Ellenger entered from the runway and came over.

"Not intruding?" he asked.

"Of course not," Lynn said quickly.

He was a tall man, his evening clothes immaculate. His face was nicely tanned; and this, with his keen grayness of eye, combined to give him a very youngish appearance. He was very rich and very sporting.

His appreciative eyes went over Lynn.

"Neat," he said softly. "Very, very neat. Isn't she, Tip?"

Tip growled, feeling foolishly at a loss in Ellenger's suave presence.

Ellenger regarded Tip, his firm mouth smiling candidly.

"Lynn has condescended to join my party at the Aster House after the game. Is it all right, Tip?"

The muscles along Tip's jaw became a ridge of small knobs. He couldn't dislike Ellenger. Not out and out. The guy had made his quiet question sound sincere, as though if it were not all right with Tip, Lynn would not be taken to the Aster House.

"Of course it's all right," Lynn said, smiling. She had regained her composure and looked very feminine and alluring.

Tip turned abruptly and walked toward the door of the dressing room. Ellenger's voice brought him up short.

"How's your ankle?"

There was no hint of sarcasm that Tip could detect.

"It'll do," he said. He went inside.

CHAPTER III

REMEMBER THE BATTLE CRY

ANDY McKINNEY wasn't given to between-the-halves tirades. He spoke to each player separately, instructing, criticizing privately. He was doing it now.

Players looked up as Tip entered but no one showed any surprise that he should have remained out of the dressing room the greater part of the intermission. He wasn't a vital cog.

He sat down, smelling the odor of sweat and liniment, letting his thoughts catch up with him.

There was a school in Maryland. Down there they knew Tip had his M.A. and could teach a better than adequate Ancient History. It was his hobby. The school was a fine school; its entrance requirements were even more rigid for its faculty than for its students. They wanted Tip's way with green kids on a football field; they wanted his brains and his exemplary, powerful legs and hands. But they didn't want hands that were dipped to the knuckles in red ink. Seven thousand dollars' worth of red ink, to be exact.

Lynn had had a lot of fun out of that much money.

So they wouldn't take him at McDowell—not that Lynn wanted him even to consider the job—until he washed off the ink. And having a brilliant last season was the only way he could think of to get anywhere near that much money. Bonuses were high if you had a good year, and you could draw an advance on next season's salary.

But you had to have a good year, and there wasn't a good year left in him.

IN THE middle of the third quarter Sutherland sent back his starting line-up and they took up where they had left off: passing and sprinting; driving and plunging. Ralph Kercheval added a neat placement from the thirty-

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three and the score stood at 10 to 0 until midway in the final period.

The break came then, but it was a matter of luck and not really earned. The Dodgers were smearing the Gold line, running over and through it with grinding cleats. They had compiled a total of sixteen first downs to five and only the dogged goal-line stands of the Spartan forward wall had prevented the score from tripling.

Now they were down on the Gold two; and the Spartan mules cinched in their belts and held once again for three downs. On the fourth try Ace Parker dropped back and shot a flat pass to Banks McFadden.

It caught every Spartan off guard but Captain Sanders. The right end batted at the ball, tipped it, juggled it, finally pulled it to his chest and spurted ninety-eight yards down the sideline to a touchdown. Harmon added the extra point and it was 10 to 7, which was not so humiliating as a whitewash.

But there were only four remaining minutes and the Dodgers resorted to conservative football, protecting their lead. Three plunges at the line and kick. It was a licking the Spartans deserved from a superior team, and if it was not satisfactory it was at least just.

And, as he stood on his own forty to kick, a high pass grazed the tips of Ace Parker's fingers and bounced crazily behind him. When the referee had untangled the melee which churned above it, Marchant, the Spartan center, was curled around the ball.

But even this late break did not needle the spirit of the park. The goal was forty-two yards away and there was less than a minute to play. The Spartans had made only five first downs all night. Crowds streaming down exit ramps hardly bothered to turn their heads. Jock's Dodgers were hot tonight.

Andy McKinney came down the bench and said quietly, "All right, Tip; kick one. You can do it. Tie it up for us. In for Larsen."

There was a mutter of disappointment from the crowd. He found the referee. "Hollbrook for Larsen."

Another voice said, "Talbot for Gillette."

Sonny Talbot was grinning at him. It made him feel warm. It was like old times. Sonny had always used to hold them for him. Andy McKinney had known that. Andy was one of the smarter ones.

Sonny still grinned. To him it was inconceivable that Tip wouldn't boot one from the forty-two and tie up the score.

The listless silence in the park made Sonny's voice in the huddle very loud.

"Hold 'em away for two seconds. Tip won't need any longer than that. Let's get going."

The huddle dissolved. There was no longer any precision; they made no attempt to disguise the play. Sonny kneeled two feet in front of Tip, his arms extended toward the center. Tip stood very still, his left foot back so that he could take one measured pace and swing into it with his body behind him. The posts were a long way off.

HE HEARD Sonny's quiet signals. He could see Marchant's face, inverted between his legs, his nose almost touching the ball. He could feel the tautness of the Dodgers across the line, their victory almost upon them, their eagerness reaching across and touching him heavily.

He wondered whether Lynn was still watching and whether it made any difference to her whether he booted this one successfully. It would to Ellenger. A tie wouldn't eliminate the Spartan's chances.

The thought of Lynn suddenly exploded any placid pattern of detachment he had managed to achieve. It made his mind go vicious with jealousy and hurt and bewilderment and he no longer saw the ball clearly between Marchant's legs or heard Sonny's signals. Anger enveloped him: a great baffling anger that shrunk everything except his own incompetence into trivial unimportance.

Something bounced against his chest and instinctively he let his hands go out, reaching for the ball that bobbled away from him. *I missed the snap from center and nobody but punks, school kids and mental midgets ever pulls that.*

He lurched forward, scooped up the ball and stood for a moment, held by his anger, his jealousy, his sense of his own incapability to do the things he had once done instinctively and incomparably. He couldn't break the spell, could not move.

Swartz and Golemgeske, the Dodger ends, hit him simultaneously. They were throwing themselves in an attempt to block his expected kick.

Sonny Talbot had materialized in front of him, the vestige of a smile on his lips.

"Let's go, Tip."

The words were electric, as from another age, another world, an almost forgotten world. *"Let's go, Tip!"* Sonny had said them when the men across the line were the Irish, the Navy Tars, the Dartmouth Big Green. *"Let's go, Tip!"* And he had always responded.

He responded now.

He followed Sonny carefully around the mass of tacklers that had converged to block a placekick. He skirted wide. Sonny dumped Svendson, managing to keep his feet. There wasn't anybody in any league could equal Sonny in running interference and keeping his feet.

Tip swiveled, pivoted, changed his pace and headed down the field along the sideline. The viciousness of anger in him seemed to spend itself in his running, in his battering into tacklers who drifted at him and fell away.

Rage entered his straightarm as it knocked back the head of Sam Francis, left him sprawling behind. His jealousy became a part of the force that drove his knee into the ribs of Ace Parker. Pug Manders swiped at him from the side and his humiliation and self-derision flung themselves in the shape of his shoulders and hips at Manders' body, jarred and jostled, twisted and spun, and freed him of the grasping arms.

But where rage and jealousy and humility could be ammunition to be discharged at the enemy from his body, the final surging sense that came to him was his utter inability; and this he knew to be the most powerful of all and knew it would defeat him in the end.

HE SAW the goal posts fifteen yards distant, looming tall and invitingly near, and behind the posts he saw everything that Lynn had ever wanted and he had been unable to give—success, a gay security, an affluent easy way of life which she demanded and deserved.

And between him and what he saw in his mind behind the goal posts loomed a solitary menacing figure and this figure was Lynn, his wife, and she was moving toward him with a reproachful scorn on her beautiful face.

You're finished, Tip. This run you're making now fools neither you nor me; it's a ghost and an echo of other

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Lynn didn't bother to rush up and kiss him when he walked off the field. But somebody else did: the copper-haired girl

runs made in other years and you will not make one like it again because the years have caught up with you. And you have no excuse.

A pain as sharp as fire seared suddenly into his right ankle and he knew he must have pivoted too quickly on it, or put too much of his weight upon it.

No man on earth could run with this fire in his ankle, Lynn; I haven't failed because I quit or because I've lost what I had. It's this ankle, Lynn, you understand? The one I wrenched or sprained or nearly broke somehow, some way, a year ago or maybe two years ago. . . Can you understand that, Lynn? . . .

Abruptly and too late he saw that the figure who moved so menacingly toward him—converging upon him, hemming him toward the sideline, tensing itself for a head-on that would drive them both out of bounds at the five—was the trim balancing figure of Banks McFadden.

Tip swore bitterly and aloud and the pain in his ankle seemed to swell beyond all reason, slowing him down, so that for one fleeting second he glimpsed McFadden's face; calm and set, and then McFadden made his lunge and they were rolling over and over and the ball was no longer under Tip's arm, but bounding forward, crazily, quickly, over the ground.

He heard the surging anguished shriek of the disappointed crowd and then heard a louder magical boom of joy overlay the disappointment.

He was picked up roughly and he wobbled for a second, and then looked and saw Jumping Joe and Captain Sanders and the rest of the Spartans crowding around the grinning figure of Marchant, the Spartan center, and gradually he realized they were standing beyond the goal line and that Marchant had fallen upon the fumbled ball over the line for a touchdown.

Only Sonny Talbot remembered to come up and say, "Nice run, Tip." He grinned. "Like against Stanford. Like against Minnesota that time!"

They took him out and Harmon missed the try for point but it didn't matter. Thirteen points were as good against ten as fourteen.

CHAPTER IV

TONIGHT WE ARE GAY

HE WALKED slowly off the field. Lynn was coming onto the field, preceding Lance and his party, but she didn't wave. A continuous ebb and flow of crowd surrounded him and he had a hard time seeing her, but he watched for her wave regardless.

It used to be that she would come up and fling herself around his neck, her mouth pressing against his, and she never minded the grime. She laughed about it.

She hadn't done that for a long time.

But now, as he pressed his way toward the clubhouse, someone else did that very thing. It stunned him. Unaccountably, it made him feel ticklish and uncertain inside. Almost grateful.

"Wonderful!" she gasped, still holding to him. "You don't know how much that run of yours did for me!" She was laughing and crying at the same time and the way her face looked made him feel as if he'd done something important.

"It was wonderful. Just as it was against Stanford and Minnesota, Tip!"

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How in hell did she know about Stanford and Minnesota? This kid who didn't look a day over nineteen.

The crowd pressed at him, beat against him jubilantly.

"What's your name?" he shouted. "Who are you?"

He had to bend down to hear her over the din.

"I'll tell you after you've dressed! Please see me. And please hurry. I'll wait here!"

For a moment he thought he saw Lynn's face among the swirling crowd; Lynn's face angry and disgusted because she had seen this girl kiss her husband.

In the dressing room the team was rather cruelly grateful. They paid the major share of their tribute to Stoker Marchant, who had had a lapse of mind when he'd snapped the center pass to Tip instead of Sonny Talbot to hold for the intended placekick—but Marchant had more than redeemed himself by charging down the field and falling upon Tip's fumble over the goal for the winning touchdown.

THE girl was waiting at the end of the runway when he came out. Several of the field floodlights were still on. A slight stir of wind caught her hair, lifting it a little so that the light shining through it made it look golden instead of coppery.

She glanced at her wrist watch. Her voice, like her eyes, was frivolous. "In New Haven after the '33 Yale game you only took six minutes to dress."

Something about her manner was contagious. He couldn't help grinning.

"What do you know about the Yale game in '33? You still wore a hair ribbon."

Her laugh seemed to bubble from her.

"I was fifteen in '33. I'm twenty-two now."

"You look eighteen."

"I'm grateful for that."

"Will you tell me your name now?"

"If you'll do me a stupendous favor."

"If I can."

"You can."

"I'll be glad to."

"See me tonight, Tip."

He grinned at her.

She frowned, tossing her head.

"Please, I'm serious. Anywhere. Some inexpensive club. Talk to me. Tell me about yourself. I know so much about you up until the last few years. From there I've lost you. I don't want to pry. Just the things you want to tell me. It's very important."

For some reason he believed that it was.

"Will you tell me who you are?"

Before she could answer, Lynn came up to them, smiling fixedly at Tip. "A very beautiful run, Tip, darling," she said. "You haven't made one like that in ten years." She glanced pointedly at the girl.

Tip said, "This is my wife, Miss—"

"Parker," the girl said. "Marion Parker." Her eyes were solemn and her lips parted in an eager mannerism which made everything she said important and exciting.

"Marion Parker?" Lance Ellenger repeated, coming up toward them. "Delighted!" He smiled and presented Tip and the girl to his party.

They were merely faces to Tip. They looked smart and rich. They made a lot of his run. He thought: They'd talk just that way about a horse of theirs that had won for them.

The girl made no bones about anything. She said to Lynn, "I was trying to make a date with your husband."

"Yes," Lynn said.

"He's absolutely loyal. I couldn't gain an inch."

Lynn failed to share the ripple of pleasant laughter from the others.

"My husband is joining us at the Aster House," she said more coldly than Tip thought was necessary. "I'm very sorry." The way she said it definitely excluded the girl.

"That's too bad," the girl said. She smiled at Tip. "Perhaps some other time. It really is important to me."

"I should imagine," Lynn said.

Tip grinned back at her. "Won't you come?" he said suddenly.

Her smile answered his. He felt fine. It was as if he and the girl had discovered some very pleasant and secret bond between them.

"I certainly will," she said.

"Really it's not Tip's place to invite—" Lynn began.

"Please come," Ellenger said. "Otherwise I'd be the extra man. Save me from being that." His eyes ran over the girl appreciatively.

"Thank you," Marion Parker said. Turning her eyes gravely upon Lynn she added, "I'd be delighted."

CHAPTER V

TIP BELONGS TO ME

THE Aster House was high-ceilinged, chandeliered, duskily subdued: the newest and most expensive place in the city. Two bands alternated on the dais at one end of the dance floor so that there was continuous music, American and Spanish; both, Tip thought, a little blaring.

He sat next to Lynn. There were eight or ten in the party. He didn't know any of them and he could remember none of their names. They addressed him familiarly, when they spoke to him at all, as Tip.

He couldn't restrain the rueful thought that he expected any moment to be asked for his blood lines and would be required to make an answer something like this: Tip, by War Cry out of Flying Eagle; winner of the hundred-yard Rose Bowl Stakes seven years ago; twenty-nine and about to be turned into the pasture.

He grinned. It didn't really matter. Nothing was so important as the fact that Lynn was jealous. It made him tingle inside. All the way down in Ellenger's big car she had sat silent, her delicate brows contracted, her gold-tinted nails tapping the window in annoyance. He hadn't helped her, preferring sadistically to let her have a brief taste of what she had so often put him through.

Ellenger had talked to Marion Parker, laughed with her as the girl disclosed a more thorough knowledge of football than Ellenger himself possessed.

"I should," she had laughed. "I've been raised on it. I had a football in place of a rattle."

And Ellenger laughed with her, enjoying her keenly, as any man would do. She had taken off her coat; and although she was the only woman not in evening gown her figure looked fresher and more provocative than those adorned in pale revealing satins and glittering accessories.

At Ellenger's request the waiter had taken up the wine cards, but Tip had got a glimpse of the prices. Such simple concoctions as Manhattans and Martinis were printed

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at a dollar and a quarter apiece. It was quite a place.

"Champagne," Ellenger said, grinning. "Champagne, everybody. Anything else would be inferior after what we saw tonight. We'll toast the league championship properly."

He leaned forward and waved down the table.

"Training's off for tonight, Tip. You earned yourself a bender with that one." As an afterthought he added, "But don't tell Andy McKinney on me. He'd fire us both." Everyone laughed amusedly but Marion Parker; her eyes caught Tip's and held them but he couldn't tell what her look had for him.

TWO waiters brought the champagne. There were four buckets with two bottles in each, swathed in ice. Ellenger told the waiters not to leave the buckets at their customary spot on the floor, but to put them on the table.

"We've some celebrating to do and it takes time to reach down," he explained. Everybody laughed. They were anticipating a swell time. Ellenger smiled at Marion Parker and filled her glass, asking, "Do you like champagne? Some people don't."

"I don't know," she said gravely. Then she smiled. "I've never tasted it."

Everybody laughed again, as if it were very funny and the thing to say but they didn't believe her.

Ellenger proposed a toast to the national championship, and before she touched her glass to her lips Marion Parker caught Tip's eyes and nodded almost imperceptibly to him. He felt puzzled and faintly pleased. He nodded back and they drank, and for a moment as their eyes held there was no one else at the table.

At intervals the buckets were replenished with bottles, or new buckets replaced the empty ones; he couldn't tell. He was becoming a little hazy about details but everything else seemed to be fine. Tonight he'd run forty yards in the last minute, like against Stanford—or was it Navy or the Irish?—many, many years ago, when he had it.

Gradually the parties at the tables in the room thinned out. There was now only one band playing. People on their way to the door stopped to congratulate Ellenger and several times he introduced them to Tip and they made much over his run.

Ellenger was loud but amicable. He was tight, Tip saw. He sank stiffly into his seat when people left and resumed his blaringly intimate conversation with Marion Parker. He made several attempts to take her hand in his but she evaded these maneuvers adroitly.

Tip felt Lynn's presence beside him and suddenly he was in the mood to do some expansive relenting. He reached out and covered the slender fingers which tapped the stem of her glass. He grinned.

"All right. You've punished me enough. Let's make up."

She looked up at him. She had been watching Ellenger and the girl. It was startling how pale anger had made her gray eyes.

"Punished you?" Her voice was peculiarly blank as if she were echoing what he had said without having really heard.

"Yes. I didn't mean to carry it this far. I didn't know you'd take it so hard. She's nothing to me. You know that."

She shook his hand from her fingers. His eyes returned to the other end of the table.

"Don't be a fool. You're drunk, Tip."

"You're jealous." He was smiling broadly now.

A direct fury came into her face, sharpening it so that it became dangerously alive.

He followed her glance. Ellenger had cupped Marion Parker's chin in his left hand and with his right hand at the nape of her neck was guiding her mouth to his. He was laughing but his eyes were deadly serious.

Marion Parker laughed too. She pulled gently away and shook her head chidingly at him. He tried again.

TIP heard a chair scrape beside him. Lynn was walking quickly around the table. She stopped behind Marion Parker, her hand taking hold of Ellenger's wrist and pulling it away from the girl's chin.

"Would you mind very much exchanging places with me?"

The girl glanced up at her, then at Ellenger, then at Tip.

"Certainly not." She got up, taking her coat from the back of her chair and came around and slipped into the chair beside Tip.

"I'm so sorry," she said softly.

He couldn't think clearly. There wasn't any pain. The pain in his chest was like the pain in his ankle, mysteriously disappearing at the most confounding times.

He was conscious of Lynn's first smile of the evening as she sat beside Ellenger. He was also conscious of the waiters disrobing the tables and unceremoniously stacking the chairs upon them preparatory to the night's work of cleaning up.

Lynn hadn't been jealous of him. He'd been a fool to think and say so. His wife was jealous of Lance Ellenger, who owned a string of horses and Tip Hollbrook.

He wanted to laugh but he knew the sound of it would be wild and ugly. He emptied his glass instead.

He kept thinking of the debts she'd run up with such amazing and charming dexterity in the years since they had been married. He remembered the honeymoon she had set her heart on: Baghdad. He never could get over that. She had thought it was in Persia. She wanted to see the city of the Arabian Nights.

So they had gone to Baghdad and it had been dirty and smelly and unmodern; and when he was becoming fascinated with the place and what it offered to abet his knowledge of ancient history, she had become bored and they had left. And it had cost him the entire bonus he had received for signing with the Spartans and half of the next season's pay in advance.

He thought of these things and he looked down the table at her, seeing her sit so close to Lance Ellenger, her smile bright and genuine as she listened to what he was saying.

And abruptly Tip became conscious of what Ellenger was saying.

". . . that's why none of you can realize what a kick I get out of owning these guys, these human dynamos. Sense of power. Buying and selling human beings . . . the best in their line. If I'm pleased with 'em they stay; if not—*phoof!*—they're out.

"Take Tip. He belongs to me. He's like a swell automobile I have which was mighty snappy in 33 and gave me a lot of service, and I keep it out at the place in the country and use it instead of junking it or trading it in. That's Tip. I don't need him. His days are over; his active, serviceable days. But I carry him. I'm grateful. . . ."

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Tip got to his feet. "Get out of here, Ellenger. You think I'm just a washed-up bum? Well get this—you don't own me!"

CHAPTER VI

THE EMPTY SHRINE

TIP heard the tiny gasp that escaped Marion Parker's lips. It was that gasp which brought him to his feet.

Ellenger looked up at him and grinned and wagged his hand. "I'm a heel, Tip. Tip, a heel. But it's the truth, isn't it? You don't mind me bragging a little as long as I'm tight and it's the truth, do you?"

"Get out of here, Ellenger," Tip said.

His tone was rough. Everybody stared at him. Their faces were surprised and the beginnings of hostility were pinching them into expressions of distaste.

"You heard me," he said. "You'd better all go. All of you get out."

The voice at his elbow was softly urgent.

"Please, Tip; please . . ."

He bent his head and looked down at the girl.

"You too, whoever you are. You get out of here with them." Unaccountably, saying that to her was the worst of all. The look in her eyes, the fresh parting of her lips in hurt. It was hero worship and he didn't want that; he couldn't be a hero any more. He wasn't capable of being a hero any more.

"Look here, Tip. This is my party; you've no right to—" Ellenger looked at him and then smiled. "Will you take care of the check as long as you seem to be taking over the party?"

"You think I can't?"

"It's quite a check."

"You think I'm just a washed up bum who can't stand on his own feet, pay his own bills, live and breathe unless you say so? I'm like an automobile, am I? Get out of here, Ellenger. Take your crowd with you. Tell 'em about the horses you own, because you don't own any human beings."

He saw Lynn's eyes, hard and glassy. He heard her voice, thin with angry humiliation.

"The drunken fool. He has three dollars in his pocket." She put her hand on Ellenger's arm. "Please let's go. He's being embarrassing and obviously this will teach him a lesson."

Tip watched them go through the door. The first inkling he had that the girl had remained was when she said, "Let me help, please." She had opened her bag and was reaching into it. "This check won't be for five cents, Tip. I have enough to make a sort of down payment on it until tomorrow."

He said, "I asked you to leave. Us washed-up bums take charity only from sporting gentlemen—from all the Lance Ellengers."

Her eyes were troubled.

"Won't you let me? A loan? You don't know how I want to help."

"Go away, Lady Bountiful. Go far away."

He watched her leave, the slim lines of her holding his gaze.

The waiter was standing beside him and now he coughed and said politely, "The check, sir."

He looked at it. The check was for a hundred and sixty dollars. He said, "Give me a pencil. I'll sign for it."

"Your name, sir?"

"Hollbrook. Tipperton Hollbrook."

The waiter coughed discreetly, making it plain the name meant nothing to him.

"I suppose, sir," he said uncertainly, "since you were a member of Mr. Ellenger's party—"

"Damn Ellenger. He has nothing to do with this."

"Oh." The waiter looked at him and his tone was

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touched with disdain. "Just a minute. I'll get Mr. Chamblis." He moved across the dance floor.

UNDER the bright work-light that splashed from the ceiling a boy was pushing a vacuum cleaner. The vacuum was almost longer than the boy and he managed it awkwardly.

Presently Louie Chamblis came out of his office and walked briskly across the floor.

"Trouble, Mr. Hollbrook?" he asked affably.

"Only about who I am."

"You are Mr. Tipperton Hollbrook."

"It's about time somebody who watches the Spartans play recognized me," Tip said, relieved.

"I do not recognize you. Phil, the waiter, told me you said you are Tipperton Hollbrook. As far as I am concerned you are Tipperton Hollbrook—whoever he may be."

"That's decent of you."

"Not at all. It merely established your identity. The name means nothing to me. There is a check for a hundred and sixty dollars you wish to sign for?"

"Yes."

"Ah. So."

Tip looked at him.

You knew about Louie Chamblis if you read your Broadway columnists. He was what is known as a successful night-clubeteer. He was a short stout man in a double-breasted pearl gray suit that was dapperly cut for his corpulent lines. He had a round red face and he wore glasses. The lenses of the glasses were thick and they made the brittle manganese eyes behind them appear almost twice their normal size. Yet he had none of the peering, squinting habits of the near or far-sighted individual.

He smiled. "You have no money with you?"

"Three dollars."

The smile widened. "Hardly enough for Phil's tip, Mr. Hollbrook." His magnified eyes regarded Tip pleasantly. "You have the money in the bank, perhaps, or at home?"

"No, I don't."

Chamblis scratched his soft pink cheek.

"Your salary would cover this check, Mr. Hollbrook?"

"No."

"Your salary for two weeks would cover it?"

Tip flushed. "No. Not quite."

"Your circumstances make it difficult for me to accede to your wish, Mr. Hollbrook. I can't see where I would profit by allowing you to sign for the check." Chamblis' eyes contained an enlarged twinkle.

"I could pay you so much a week."

"Yes?"

Tip hesitated. His weekly salary wasn't meeting his expenses as it was, what with his and Lynn's separate rooms at the hotel and Lynn's persistent demands for an allowance increase. He retracted sullenly, "No. . . . I couldn't."

Chamblis smoothed the lapels of his pearl gray suit.

"Would your credit stand investigation?"

Tip's head came up sharply. "No, it wouldn't."

"Ah, so?" Chamblis smiled. He reached up and patted Tip's shoulder. "I do not mean to embarrass you. It is all right for you to go. The check will be taken care of. It was Mr. Ellenger's party. I will call him in the morning. Naturally he will settle. There is nothing to worry about. It is late, Mr. Hollbrook. Go home and think nothing more of the matter."

The sodden liquor in Tip came to sudden ugly life.

"You don't get Ellenger to pay my bill. It's my bill. I'll make it good somehow."

"But he made the reservation."

"I don't care if he did. The party ended on me."

Chamblis' eyebrows arched above his glasses and the enlarged eyes, pleasantly wary, studied Tip.

"Come into my office, please."

TIP sat disconsolately in a chair in the large beige-leathered office. Chamblis sat behind the enormous desk, seeming pink and dwarfed.

"Mr. Hollbrook, I pride myself on my instincts. They tell me now that you are a fine young man. What trouble are you in that brings such a predicament as this, such unhappiness that I see on your face?"

Tip glared at him.

"Never mind the sunshine and salvation. I can take whatever's coming to me. I'll work the bill out. I can wash plenty of dishes."

The great eyes contemplated him expressionlessly. "I have an adequate number of expert dish washers."

Tip shrugged wearily. The liquor was completely gone and a sudden exhaustion was catching up with him.

"You can call a cop. I don't think it will do any good in a case like this, but you can call one."

"No."

"What's to be done about it? You don't intend to skip it."

Chamblis massaged his pink face with the tips of his fingers. He pushed up his glasses and kneaded his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Then he adjusted the glasses on his nose, his eyes leaping into prominence again.

"No, I don't intend to skip it. One would not remain in business two weeks if one skipped hundred-and-sixty-dollar items. You will work it out. Willie manages the vacuum with difficulty. It will be easier for you."

Chamblis stood up. "You will work in front. A cleaning job. In front it is women's work. Charwomen are usually old and do not have the strength to use the weights on the dance floor and will not climb so high to polish the mirrors and brass and chandeliers. But I cannot get men to do it. They complain that it is women's work. You see, Mr. Hollbrook?"

"Now you have a man who *has* to do it."

"Yes."

Tip looked at his hands. He couldn't think of anything important to say.

"You are a big and a very nice fellow, my instincts tell me, Mr. Hollbrook. I wonder what it is, then, that is the matter with you."

Tip was very tired. After a while, when he did not speak, Chamblis said, "Be here at two in the morning tomorrow. And you are to use the rear entrance."

TIP woke up at noon, dressed, breakfasted at a White Tavern for fifteen cents and had started up the Elevated steps when the insistent honking of a horn turned him around.

Marion Parker sat at the wheel of a '39 roadster, beckoning him. He went up, scowling a little as he noticed how well she looked.

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"You look swell, Mr. Tip Hollbrook," she said, smiling.

Immediately he felt better.

"Let me drive you to the park," she said.

She was a good driver. He relaxed, sitting back and watching her profile. She wore a deep blue sports suit which set off her coppery hair. Her leg, as she tramped on the accelerator, had a long slim strength to it that was pleasing.

Stopping for a light at an intersection, she turned and looked at him. "What did you do about the check, Tip?"

"I took care of it."

"It's going to be difficult though, isn't it?"

"What do you know about it?"

She held his eyes.

"The light's green," he said.

The car moved. "Don't be angry, Tip. I went there this morning. I spoke to Mr. Chamblis."

He restrained his anger, saying coldly, "Is there any information about me that I could furnish you personally?"

She didn't answer until she drew the car up at the curb in front of the park. Then she stared ahead and spoke without looking at him and he could not see her eyes.

"Listen, Tip. It's not my intention to pry into your affairs."

For some reason he didn't get out. He waited, knowing she would explain.

"Perhaps it won't make much sense to you. But this is how it is." She looked at him and looked away quickly. "We didn't live far from Atlantic University. I watched you play when I was still in high school. I used to beg my brother to take me on Saturdays. He had a student ticket but I had to pay my way and it was expensive for a high school girl's allowance.

"I borrowed from my brother and ran up quite a debt to him, but it was his own fault. He talked about you so much, morning, noon and night. I suppose he really started it. After a while he had me in the habit of thinking as he did—that you were a kind of demigod. I don't suppose you remember him; he was in your class. His name was Bill."

There had been twelve hundred students graduating that year, he remembered. He couldn't remember any Bill Parker.

"I watched all the home games," she continued. "I went to the Rose Bowl. I watched you graduate."

She turned quickly towards him and her eyes searched his.

"Does it sound so silly? Am I embarrassing you?"

He shook his head.

She said quietly, "When I was a sophomore at Atlantic I used to go a lot to the gymnasium and look at your jersey in that little glass cabinet. It's a—a sort of shrine."

She laughed softly, inwardly, as if at herself and forgetful of his presence.

Then she smiled frankly at him. "Eventually I got over it. Or almost over it." Her words were barely audible.

For a moment he held on to her eyes. They had the sparkling eagerness that all intensely blue eyes possess; and he saw in them a tiny shadow of the feeling which clouded his own. For one racking second he wanted to take her tightly in his arms, put the strength of his hands on her; for she could do this to him, making him feel capable and not incompetent and lost.

Abruptly he got out of the car, swearing inwardly at himself. He was married and a has-been at twenty-nine and there wasn't any use forgetting it.

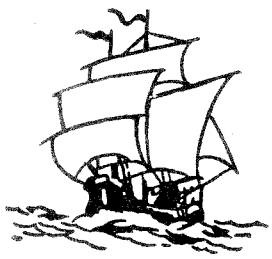
She leaned toward him. "Tip! Can't you recapture those years? The Tip Hollbrook who beat Minnesota, who took the cup at graduation for best representing an Atlantic man? He would never have let a mysterious injury slow him down last night—prevent him from scoring the winning touchdown! That's the Tip Hollbrook I've lost, and it's because of him I'm meddling like this. Can't you understand?"

Her eyes were brightly wet. He took hold of himself. There was nothing to be gained in being aroused and stirred by the memories she brought back, by the presence of herself. If he listened to her any longer he'd forget he was washed up, injured, a failure.

"Thanks for the concern," he said; "and the lift."

He went into the clubhouse, into the odor of oil of wintergreen and sweat. . . .

TO BE CONCLUDED IN THE NEXT ISSUE



CAN'T KEEP GRANDMA IN HER CHAIR

She's as Lively as a Youngster—Now her Backache is better

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

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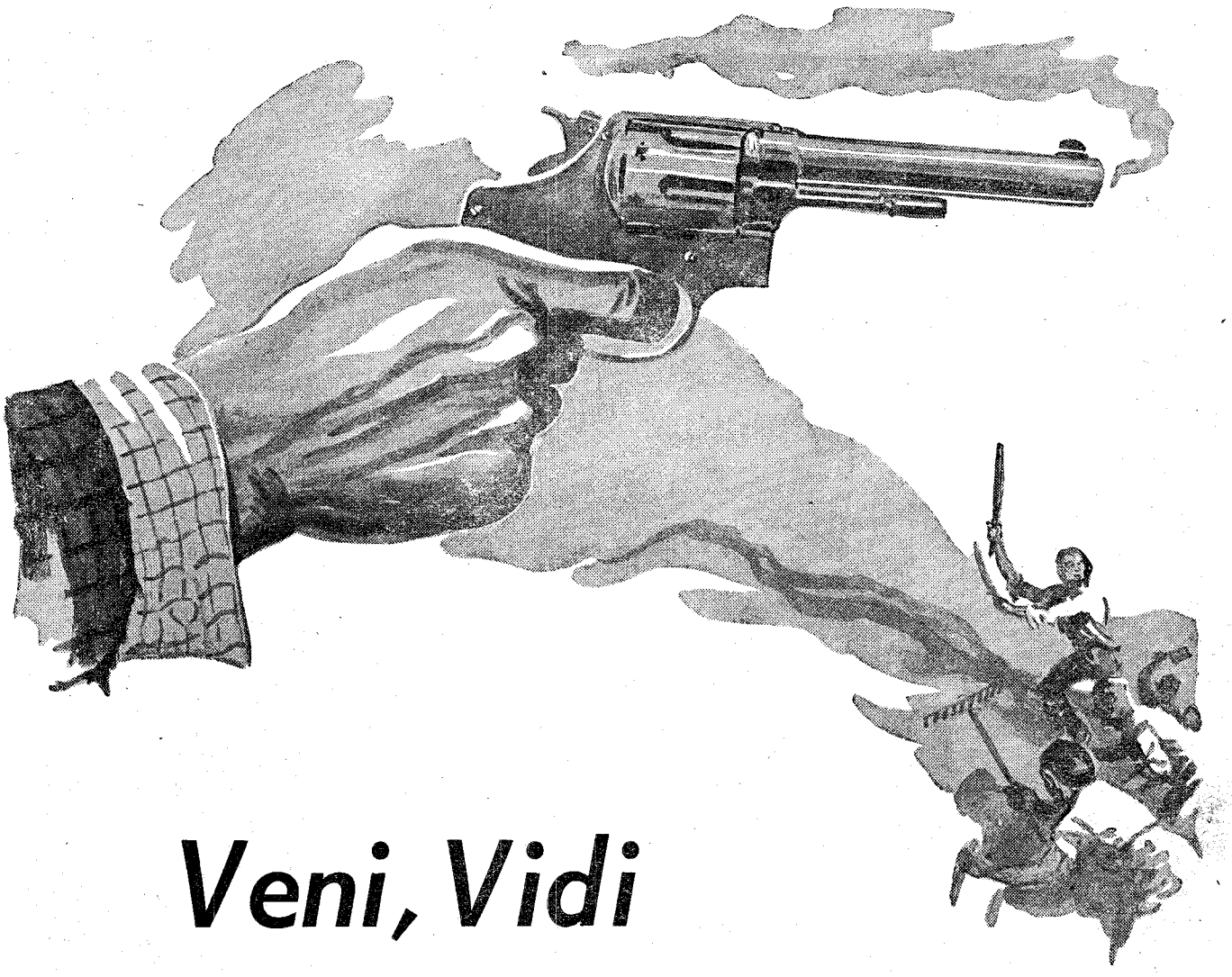

Veni, Vidi —Vichy

The Nazi terror in France has boomeranged. It has met murder, head-on; the day of reckoning is at hand for all the French sell-outs and their foreign masters. This is the story behind the shooting of Laval and Deat; of what preceded it, and of what is to follow

His reward would be sure death. There wasn't a chance of getting away through this sullen mob of mercenary traitors—not a chance in the world; and he knew it. Madame Guillotine, that old keenest of cutthroats, was at his elbow, waiting for him to draw his revolver.

And so he drew it. He knew his targets: two men, two arch betrayers of his beloved France: symbols of the degradation to which his own sweet land had been brought. He took careful aim, fired twice; then fired two more shots—perhaps three—hitting a couple of lesser mongrels for luck.

Those shots rocked France; they were heard around the world.

This was Paul Colette; this was August 27, 1941. Americans caught their breath for a moment, wondering whether Laval and Deat would die; wondering what it would mean if they did. But the meaning of what had happened—that lay deep in the angry hearts of the French people. Theirs is the story to be told, before the story of Paul Colette can be understood at all.

Great and terrible things are happening in France—now!

HE WAS afraid, this Nazi officer. Here in the Metro—the Paris subway—was the smell of Death itself. The two young Frenchmen near him carried it. They were moving closer in the car, and their eyes strangely smiled; one of them had a knife. The man without the knife grasped the officer's pistol hand. The other sent the blade deep as he murmured, "For France."

. . . And then the Gestapo went feverishly to work: for here was something really serious. Here was the beginning of open revolt. And in little enough time, through the treachery of the debauched city police, the two men of the Metro were found. Santé Prison—and the terror—waited to receive them.

Do Americans know what can happen when the Gestapo's best agents go to work? Those two French patriots

By Robert Carse

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Can a hireling hand any longer hold the Nazi lid over France?

found out—and *that* story didn't get into the papers.

Steel rods were used on those two men; burning cigarettes were jammed against armpits and throats. The men didn't talk. Kicks were delivered to the groins, to the kneecaps, to the spines. Those Frenchmen didn't say a word.

The Gestapo, tired at last, took them out and shot them.

And that was *really* the beginning. Word of the execution spread fast; faster than the official announcement by General Ernst von Schaumburg, the Nazi military commander of the Paris zone, and the French fascists who were his paid heelers.

And so it came about in Paris that quiet-faced men sat in a little *cafézinc* off the Arch St. Denis. They all ordered the same sort of drink; and from under the bar the owner passed each one of them a bundle of illicit newspapers. The papers told of the same sort of thing all over France: a former general of the Air Force had been caught running a printing press; a captain of the Navy had been arrested with others as a spy; peasants had pushed sentries into canals; an amorous sergeant of Nazi occupation troops had died in a haystack with a pitchfork in his back.

France, betrayed, is taking toll. These are events of but a few short months ago; but the surge is continuing, increasing, now—as these words are read.

Listen—the Landslide!

BUT the Nazis had the answer—or thought they had. Terror would freeze the hearts of the people, put an end to this nonsense.

The quiet-faced men in the little café, however, were not impressed. They left the place as they entered, separately, their caps pulled down a bit against the street light. And at the corner, beneath a famous old arch, one of them talked for a moment with a girl. She was one of them; and when she left, she understood what was to be done.

The girl took a taxi—a particular one. "Listen carefully," she told the driver. "Station Montparnasse. Understand—*Montparnasse!*"

"You find me no more deaf than mute," the driver said. He was watching the Nazi in civilian clothing across the street as he turned his taxi toward Montparnasse.

"Maybe," the girl said. "But I've had a *type maboul*

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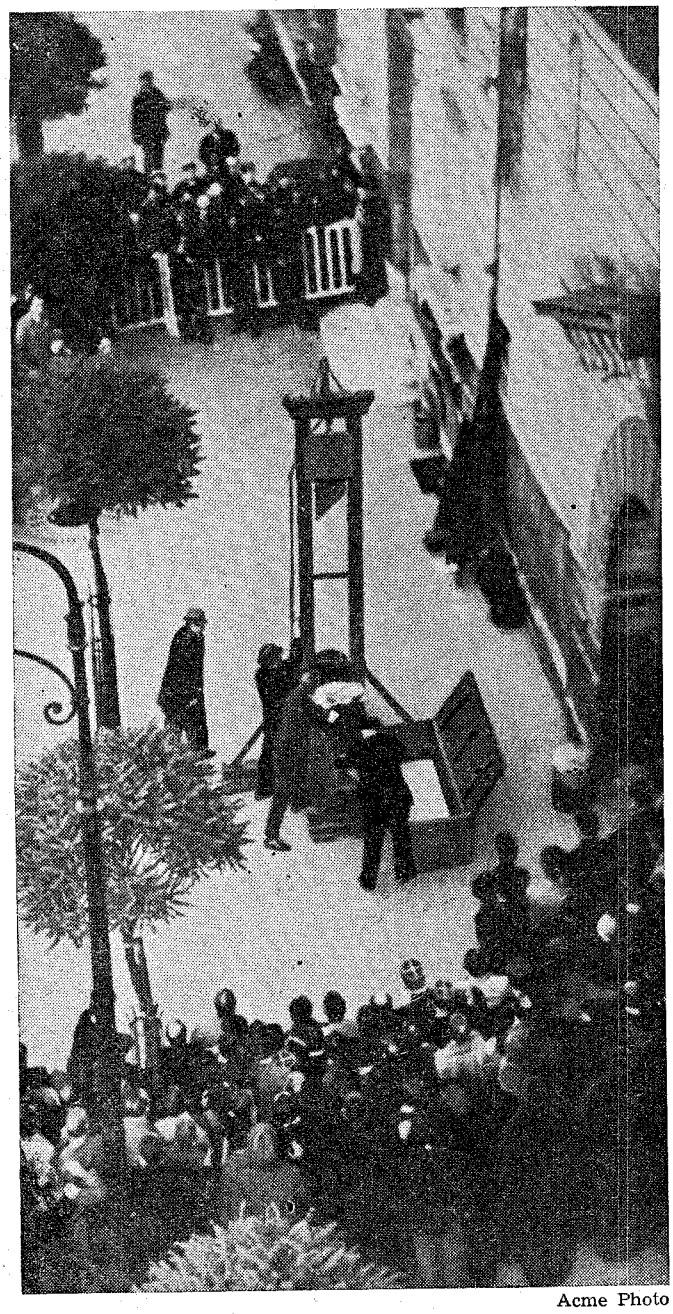

Acme Photo

The sight Colette saw clear that day last August—Madame Guillotine

like you drive me half way to Juvisy before he knew where I wanted to go."

"Juvisy?" The driver raised his voice a bit on that, shrugged expressively. "But in me," he said, "you have the right man . . . ."

It was not necessary then to drive the girl as far as Montparnasse—or Juvisy either, for that matter. Her part was done.

For the taxi driver faithfully passed the word: *Montparnasse . . . Juvisy.* A boy selling kindling from door to door was next to get the message. He gave it in turn to a doctor; the doctor to a clerk in a pharmacy; the clerk to a railroad yard worker.

And deep in the watches of that night there was a dark stirring about Montparnasse Station. A sudden flareup of riot—unheralded, unexpected. The military railroad guard was called out, concentrating on the disturbance. And while they were busy, a man crept into the headquarters room in the station; cut telephone wires. Other men, far from the scene of the disturbance, were working feverishly, quietly . . . .

By the time the riot was quelled and the phone wires restored, a double length of rail had been taken up outside Montparnasse Station—and four cars of a German train had been derailed. The Nazis were frantic. They rounded up at least eight railroad workers, including the yardmaster and the chief switch tender. They did what they knew how to do.

And their captives wouldn't talk; they didn't know a thing.

So much for Montparnasse. On the same night, at the same time, land mines placed beneath the rails at Juvisy, on the mail line of the French National Railway, caused a violent explosion in the freight yards. That taxi driver in Paris had remembered—and passed on—everything that his passenger had said; and others had known how to read between the lines.

Then, just for further emphasis—so that the Nazis might be sure to get the point—another train was wrecked across the main tracks in the station at Poissy, blocking all traffic for thirty hours.

Listen, world: the rumblings of a terrific landslide are growing, moving in the direction of Versailles and an ex-sailor with a gun.

THE Nazis called their French panders—the Judases of the nation. This was not part of the deal of betrayal, this thing that was happening; they made that clear.

The old man at Vichy—Petain with his hook nose and his vague, but bitter and terrible dreams of grandeur—had said that he could keep France loyal to him. Or loyal to his junior partner, the little drunken admiral, Darlan. What was happening was nothing such as Petain had promised.

Petain was in his dotage, the men called from Vichy admitted, staring nervously around them as they spoke. As for Darlan, he spent most of the time before the mirrors in his hotel room, trying on new uniform tunics and practicing the gesture of speeches that vilified the British and the Soviet Union.

So General von Schaumburg took matters in hand and issued an edict of martial law for the Paris zone. Twenty thousand troops rode the streets and boulevards. They rode in tanks and armored cars and escort cars and trucks. The steel treads clanked rapping over the macadam in the soft summer night; and the Parisians who sat on the benches under the plane trees gazed with thoughtful eyes.

Now there was no further doubt for these men of Paris, who for nearly a year had waited in the Maginot Line and then, in a month of awful retreat and confusion, had seen their country sold by traitors. They knew their enemies now; and Petain stood with Darlan and Laval and Deat beside Hitler.

What these bitter, betrayed men did next was characteristic. It is a Parisian art, to demonstrate; Parisians have demonstrated for generations. And now, in the midst of this show of Nazi martial might, they took up one of their oldest weapons.

The men and women who marched in mockery of the Nazis at St. Lazare Station and at the Arch St. Denis and through the suburbs had about them a sort of pleasant gayety.

Nazi war machines racketed past them.

How droll, some wit in the crowd said, that when the Nazis needed gasoline so badly, here they seemed to care nothing for the precious fluid. The tanks got plenty of it. That, *par exemple,* was not very intelligent.

A Nazi over-lieutenant heard that, and stopped the staff car in which he rode. He got out of it and walked through the crowd to the man who had spoken. He was an old man, and the Nazi knocked him down with his first blow.

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International News Radiophoto

The police lost no time in getting their hands around Colette's throat. Note the battered condition of his face, too

Then the crowd gathered growling, more quickly than the soldiers in the staff car moved. The over-lieutenant was badly trampled, drooling blood when they got there. Half a dozen arrests were made.

"You'll die for it," the Nazis said. "We're your masters."

The crowd was silent. Several of the women were helping the old man. From the rear of the crowd a brick slung, and took a troop-truck driver along the jaw. "That for you, masters!" was the yell that came out of the darkness.

The avalanche is on its way; it cannot be stopped now.

The Terror Has Caught

YES, we are drawing closer to Versailles; closer to the twenty-seventh of August, 1941. . . . A man whom Petain called his Minister of Justice, Joseph Barthelmy, established the special courts for the Nazis. He described them as "terrorist" courts in his proclamation, and everybody who was brought to trial before them was "either a Jew or a Communist-de Gaullist". Agents of the Gestapo gathered the evidence for him, listened to the testimony, and were present when the judges made their decisions.

The terror had caught. The Nazi conquerors were afraid of the growing, steady spread of the revolt. Now, instead of the execution squad and bullet, their weapon was the guillotine.

In Czechoslovakia, the Gestapo had let the Elite Guard loose to murder and rape the boy and girl students of the University of Prague; and in Poland scores of those who had resisted were lashed together with wire, soaked with gasoline and burned to death. But here in France, in the calculation of the Nazis, the worst indignity was the slant-sided blade that fell with the swift, clicking whir. *La Veuve Noire:* The Black Widow—the guillotine!

During the next fortnight, there were half a dozen acts of sabotage on the railroad lines. Twelve passengers were injured in a train accident in the occupied zone. An auto-rail train and a freight train collided at the Carneville Station, South of Cherbourg.

The *Paris Soir,* serving as mouthpiece for the French fascists, asked that the new courts be made to work much faster.

Paul Colette read the edition of the *Paris Soir* in the channel town of Ouistreham. The anger that had been dark and heavy in him ever since Dunkirk began to flare in his brain. He was young, just twenty years old, and his years as a ship's stoker hadn't given him much of an education. But what was printed in the *Paris Soir* was wrong.

Those guys tried to blame all that happened on the French people. Well, he knew better. Once, a couple of years ago, he'd heard similar talk from the Croix de Feu bunch of Fascists. Then he'd gone in the Navy and then there'd been the war and Dunkirk.

His ship was the *Niger* at Dunkirk. She was sunk, and the memory of her going was awful. Men died scalded and screaming around him. He could still see the oil-black faces, hear the choking cries of the wounded, the drowning.

Some British soldiers had pulled him out into a fishing boat. They were part of the force that evacuated to England. Stukas came down in terrific, howling flight at them, and tore apart and tore apart again the patient lines of men wading out from the beach. The town itself, the British soldiers said, was held by Scottish troops and a brigade of French Negroes, Senegalese. He should be proud of the Senegalese, they told him; the Negroes were good troops.

He was proud, he said. But all French troops were good, if they had a chance to fight. . . .

OVER in England, he was kept in London for a couple of weeks. But the Nazi planes came there to batter at the great city, wreck it with explosion and flame. He was glad to go back to France, because he loved his own country. But then it was over, the men who stuttered as they talked told him about the armistice.

Now Paul Colette tramped the newspaper underfoot. His boots were worn out and he could feel the crumpled paper against his bare soles. Down the street from his home in Caen, he recollected, was a man who used to be agent for the Croix de Feu, but whose present job was getting recruits for the new anti-Bolshevist Legion. They paid well in that, the man had told him when he was home last, for the simple reason that the money came from the Nazis.

So the decision was easy for Colette. There were always going to be men like him around France unless something was done about it. Men would always be dying in ships like the *Niger,* or on the sands of Dunkirk or in the crashing streets of London. He didn't care any more for himself; he was all eaten up inside by what had happened in the stokehold of the *Niger,* and afterwards.

But his Navy revolver was still at home, and Caen was no real walk from here. Once he got home, that man who'd been with the Croix de Feu would send him on to Paris as a volunteer for the anti-Bolshevist Legion. He then

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could take care of some of them who'd sold France to the invaders.

He knew their names from the papers. Pierre Laval and Marcel Deat were the two he wanted in particular. They'd done their best to sell out France long before even Petain, and they were closely behind this anti-Bolshevist Legion.

The Song and the Thunder

RENCHMEN—all kinds of them—were gathered there in the barracks courtyard at Versailles. Most of them were shabby, though, and ill at ease, Colette remarked. They'd come here to accept one more promise, not knowing that sooner or later it meant death for them.

He took his glance from the ranks of the anti-Bolshevist Legion.

The hired band out in front of them was beginning to play *La Marseillaise*. It was the first time the song had been played since the armistice, Colette thought. That brought everything very clear, sharply into focus for him.

He saw France as it was meant to be in the song. A lot of people had died for France, not because it had fine lakes and mountains and rivers and farms. It was because France for them was liberty and equality, brotherhood. They would rather have those three things than all the rest in the world put together. So they'd fought to take the Bastille, and fought the same way at Valmy and all the other great battles.

Now they were about to start to fight again.

But the men who ordered *La Marseillaise* played here weren't honest about it. They used the song as a trick, to get folks to go and fight for them personally, for their own profit. The knowledge made Colette very angry, and very sure of his purpose.

He took the revolver out of his pocket. The greasy little man with the cowlick and the white tie was Laval, he recognized; and the other, with the dog face, was Marcel Deat.

He pulled the trigger and saw Laval, then Deat jerk around with the jolt of the bullets. "It's our song," he whispered, "and belongs to us, free people." Then a stocky man he knew to be the major of the Legion and another fellow who was a volunteer came at him, and he turned the revolver, shot them.

A very heavy blow struck him from behind and he went down. The next blow you'll feel, he thought as he fell fainting, will be the guillotine. But you won't mind it. Just, in your head, keep on listening to the song.

But it wasn't the song he heard: it was the avalanche. Its rumbling had swelled into his shots; and his shots had started boulders that will some day come crashing on the head of every traitor who sold out France.

You read the papers yesterday, and the day before? Three more Nazis shot; French fascist wounded, near death, a Nazi headquarters building is burned. It can't be stopped now: the landslide of wrath is churning into thunder!

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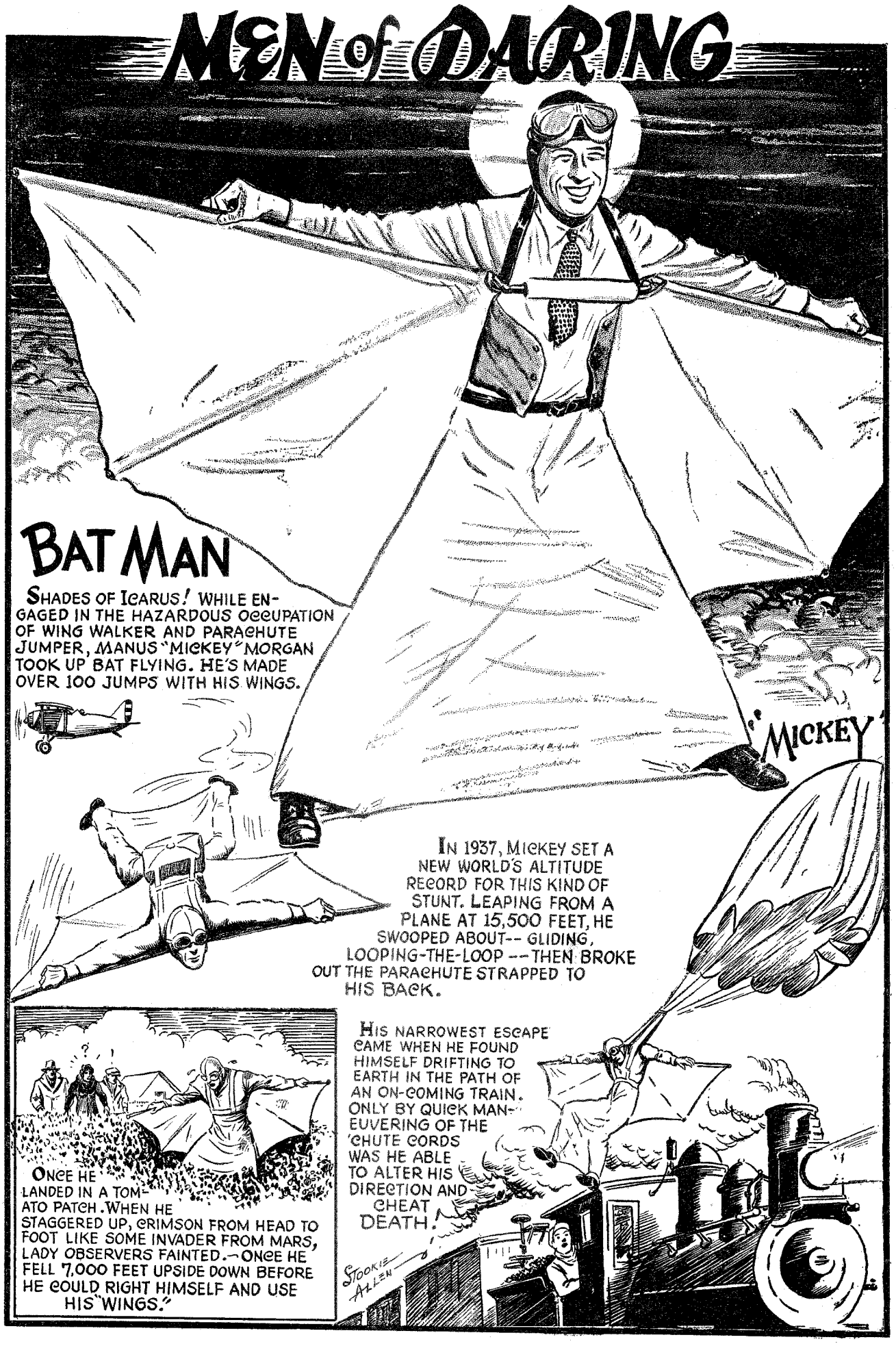
MEN of DARING
BAT MAN
SHADES OF ICARUS! WHILE ENGAGED IN THE HAZARDOUS OCCUPATION OF WING WALKER AND PARACHUTE JUMPER, MANUS "MICKEY" MORGAN TOOK UP BAT FLYING. HE'S MADE OVER 100 JUMPS WITH HIS WINGS.
"MICKEY"
IN 1937, MICKEY SET A NEW WORLD'S ALTITUDE RECORD FOR THIS KIND OF STUNT. LEAPING FROM A PLANE AT 15,500 FEET, HE SWOOPED ABOUT-- GLIDING, LOOPING-THE-LOOP --THEN BROKE OUT THE PARACHUTE STRAPPED TO HIS BACK.
ONCE HE LANDED IN A TOMATO PATCH. WHEN HE STAGGERED UP, CRIMSON FROM HEAD TO FOOT LIKE SOME INVADER FROM MARS, LADY OBSERVERS FAINTED.—ONCE HE FELL 7,000 FEET UPSIDE DOWN BEFORE HE COULD RIGHT HIMSELF AND USE HIS WINGS."
HIS NARROWEST ESCAPE CAME WHEN HE FOUND HIMSELF DRIFTING TO EARTH IN THE PATH OF AN ON-COMING TRAIN. ONLY BY QUICK MANEUVERING OF THE 'CHUTE CORDS WAS HE ABLE TO ALTER HIS DIRECTION AND CHEAT DEATH!
STOOKIE ALLEN

A True Story in Pictures

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They went down to where that globe of metal churned perilously close to the ship

Granite Mug

By Richard Howells Watkins

Author of "Deep Blue Danger," "Cockeyed Cargo," etc.

On deck, Mr. Mate: There's disaster a-stern; and your job is to produce a reasonable facsimile of a hero. But be careful—or you may turn out the real thing

ROCK BARCLAY, the second mate, wouldn't give a nickel for enough physical courage to kick a barracuda in the teeth. In the last war, having a crag-like visage that looked as old as the hills, Mr. Barclay had broken into minesweepers at the age of seventeen. In that branch of the U. S. Navy courage is particularly ordinary.

But Rock had an uneasy feeling that Claire Kane valued courage more highly. That girl had nerve herself and she'd want plenty in the man she loved.

That was why Rock couldn't allow Chris Pendleton to be shown up. Chris was Rock Barclay's candidate for Claire's hand.

Consequently, when Mr. Rice, mate of the *Benjamin Hook,* fast on his feet and big around the biceps, hit Chris Pendleton in the jaw and backed him from the anchor windlass to the break of the forecastle head, Rock Barclay was quick to intervene.

"Come on, come on, we'll have twenty-thirty Portugee gendarmes to throw in the Tagus if you don't cut that out!" Rock said. He thrust in between them but he faced Mr. Rice. Rock's face was expressionless but nevertheless formidable. Granite Mug, they called him in the forecastle.

He could see that Mr. Rice, with his black eyes gleaming, was set on throwing the second engineer down the ladder.

"Besides," Rock Barclay improvised hastily, "here comes the Old Man in a shore boat!"

That stopped the mate long enough for Mr. Barclay to hustle the willing engineer aft to his room. Mr. Rice couldn't have a scandalized Old Man asking for another chief officer. He couldn't. Claire was Mr. Rice's reason for staying in the *Benjy.*

"If it would do me any good I'd make one pancake out o' the two of you," Rock said between his teeth.

Ostensibly that fight had started over the anchor windlass, a point where deck and engineroom meet. But Rock Barclay, silently running Pendleton aft past pop-eyed refugees on the main deck, knew that rivalry over Claire Kane was the real reason.

In Pendleton's room Rock anxiously examined the handsome Pendleton's jaw. "You'll carry a lump on it but that's better'n a black eye," he said.

"That big thug knows I can't stand up to him with fists," said Chris Pendleton. "He meant Claire to see, but she was busy with those refugee kids."

"Let it ride," Mr. Barclay advised. "But be set to shoot one finishing punch at Rice when it'll do you most good. I'm with you, kid."

"Look here!" said Pendleton. He looked hard at the big second. "You're not playing me against the mate and then stepping in yourself, are you? You won't let me down?"

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Rock Barclay shook his heavy head. "Not me," he said. "I'm not in this at all. I—I ain't her type."

"I'm trusting you," said Pendleton.

ROCK opened the door. Mr. Rice was lingering near. He was on the boil because the Old Man hadn't been in the shore boat. His black eyes burned at the second officer.

Rock Barclay paused opposite him, arms akimbo, an easy position for action. But Mr. Rice's attitude was nonchalant, with a hand in the pocket of his jacket.

"You know you couldn't charm a bumboatman's fancy so you're just mixing in to spoil things for me, aren't you?" said Mr. Rice. His voice took on that curt, superior edge he used to emphasize to Rock Barclay that he was a gentleman, schoolship trained, while sweat had been the principal ingredient of Rock's master's ticket.

"What's charm got to do with a windlass?" asked Rock, knotting up his granite countenance.

"I'm warning you to keep out, Mr. Barclay," said the mate. "We may well need a new second officer when we hit New York."

"You may get a new second officer," said Rock. "But I'm tellin' you, grass widow, you won't get a second mate. There's a difference."

"You're a dog in the manger, eh?"

"I'm a dog at the seat o' your pants, mister," said Rock Barclay emphatically. "Chris Pendleton's worth six o' you when it comes to giving a girl a decent life an' I'm for him."

They parted silently to go about last-minute duties. The *Benjy*, with a slim homeward-bound cargo and nineteen refugees cramming her re-fashioned deck house, was near departure.

Mr. Barclay found a mess boy and ordered him to bring ice to Pendleton's cabin to aid in restoring the symmetry of the engineer's features. Looks counted with a girl as well as courage. Rock neglected duty a moment to snoop around for a glimpse of Claire. When he found her his stomach did an apprehensive loop. She was laughing with Mr. Rice, as the mate tenderly assisted the five refugee kids to the forecastle head.

Rock Barclay groaned. Even the kids took to the easy-mannered Mr. Rice. Last time Rock had smiled at one the kid had yelled bloody murder. He sighed and watched Claire. Despite her rig and rating nobody would ever mistake that girl for a regular stewardess. She had the authority of a graduate nurse and the venturesome eye of an aviatrix. Her desire to pull her weight in the world had brought her as close to the war as an American woman could hope to get—the refugee run from Europe to the States. And yet, as scowling Rock Barclay saw it, she needed a nurse herself.

"Falling for a seagoing Don Juan like Rice!" muttered Mr. Barclay. "A man more than half married, with only a Mexican divorce in the offing and plenty of girl friends in Lisbon! But it ain't over yet. Chris Pendleton's a right good young fellow, barring his fists. If I was thirty-one myself and not such a lug, instead of forty-one—"

He sighed, remembering Claire's gentle dismissal, and examined the lashings that held a cargo boom down in its cradle.

"I hope that boy fetched Pendleton the ice," he said. He wasn't fooling himself about Mr. Rice being easy to stop.

Claire came aft at full steam, her heels tapping out a competent tattoo. Her eyes crinkled up at him, though her lips did not smile.

"What's this I hear about Chris Pendleton kicking poor Mr. Rice around, Rock?" she asked.

"How'd you—" The girl had a way of blasting his glibness into lame incoherence.

She was gone. He grinned reluctantly after her. Somehow she knew he was backing Chris. He wasn't sure he liked the way she kidded him about it.

CAPTAIN GUNSSEN came aboard. Twenty minutes later the *Benjamin Hook* was heading down the Tagus for the open sea—open except for the stuff that was flying over it, crawling on it and sneaking under it, carrying death.

Mr. Barclay, aft, looked forward uneasily toward Claire on the lower bridge deck. Claire was instructing the five assorted refugee kids to wave a cheery farewell to the continent where they had been born and abused. Claire staged the farewell celebration, Rock knew, to cheer up the older passengers, who were in tears.

No British patrol boats challenged the *Benjy* as the old wagon put the headlands of Portugal under the sea. They knew the *Benjy* and her run. Mr. Barclay, pacing the bridge, looked suspiciously at the magnificence of the afternoon. But even with a bit of weather plainly ahead, he wasn't sorry to be getting off soundings. The war zone was no place for Claire, however she thought about it.

As he went off watch he got a sour look from Captain Gunssen. That meant that Mr. Rice was getting in some dirty work against him with the Old Man. The war was on.

At midnight, when he dragged himself out to stand the middle watch, the weather hadn't arrived. But he still sniffed it.

In those war-torn seas he kept sharp lookout. He saw Claire as well as the black water beyond the lifting forecastle head. Though she was well into her twenties, had an air of vast sophistication and a grandmotherly way with her toward the distressed of all nations, Rock wasn't deceived. She was sensitive, easily hurt, standing on her nerve the tough grind of stewardess, nurse and friend of the refugees. A cynical, loose-living fellow like Rice wouldn't do her any good.

But Mr. Rice himself didn't agree. When he came into the wheelhouse to take over at four A.M. he was curiously confidential. "I'm going to marry Claire as soon as my divorce is final," he said. "I need a good woman in my life."

He shook his head. "My wife is a heel, Barclay. That's all even a gentleman could call her—a heel."

"A real coincidence, then, you an' her gettin' together, huh?" said Mr. Barclay and formally passed the course.

Rice seized his sleeve. "I'm not making threats," he said. "But if you and that stooge Pendleton don't keep clear you'll be surprised."

Rock Barclay's thick body shook. His right hand knotted up. Rice maintained his grip on the sleeve of Barclay's coat and waited.

The helmsman was popping his eyes. The sweat was hot on Rock's forehead. He ought to land his fist on Rice's mouth. But discipline was strong in Rock Barclay's fibre. This was the mate he was facing; this was the bridge he was standing on. His hand opened up.

"You heard me give you the course," he said. "Do I get a repeat?"

Mr. Rice laughed softly. But he seemed disappointed. He repeated the course.

Rock Barclay descended the bridge ladder. He was surprised to encounter the Old Man, motionless, planted on the lower bridge. Sometimes he stood like that for hours on end. Rock was glad he hadn't hit the mate. Rice had known Gunssen was there.

Soberly Rock went to his room. He didn't look at the snapshot of Claire, surreptitiously taken, that lay con-

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cealed between the pages of a book on his dresser. He turned in. Like a good seaman he dropped off at once.

MR. BARCLAY'S big feet were on the matting long before his fingers had reached the light switch or his head had shaken itself clear of sleep.

He knew that something had happened to the old wagon. He hadn't been asleep long. His big body, though accustomed to rough usage, was aching protests at being ripped out of its first sleep by his alert professional mind.

Up on the bridge the mate rang down the engines. Mr. Barclay's massive countenance twisted in perplexity, which failed to beautify it. He thought of Claire. Damn a girl in a war zone! Especially that girl.

Automatically Mr. Barclay clambered into his trousers and watch coat. Ten years before he had spent three days lightly clad, in a lifeboat full of thickly clothed seamen. The humiliation had cut worse than the northwest wind, which had had quite a cut of its own.

Before he got a hand on the knob of his door his mind had warned him that almost any war deviltry could have engulfed them. But there had been no explosion, no crunch of buckling steel plates, no shriek of a near miss passing over. Nevertheless something had happened to her.

Outside, he darted a quick glance down the stairs leading to a lower deck. As if summoned by his thought, Claire, fingers on a button of her white uniform, thrust into sight below. She peered upward. Her face showed her ready for anything. The girl was alive as well as awake.

"G' back to bed," Mr. Barclay commanded. "Nothing's up."

"You ought to learn to lie, Rock," Claire said. "Do you think I'm going to scream?"

Ingrained discipline turned Mr. Barclay's unhandsome feet toward the bridge. By that time he had decided that what had jerked him out of sleep had been a grinding reluctance of the engine to twirl the screw just before Mr. Rice had rung down. At the ladder he met the mate himself coming down.

They looked at each other, deadpan.

"I think we're scrambled up in some wreckage," said Mr. Rice, heading aft. He had a powerful flashlight in his hand.

"Yuh," said Mr. Barclay, walking with him. The ship under his feet was slowly working around to lie in the trough of the mild southwesterly swell that she had been taking on the port bow. Rock remembered that there was weather due.

The *Benjy* was lit up like a bursting rocket to proclaim her neutrality to all evil things of war. The water beyond her taffrail was total blackness. Mr. Rice's flashlight stabbed this way and that, proving only that that water was indeed black.

A junior engineer joined them. The chief had sent him to get a report. Back on the bridge Captain Gunssen, though a placid square-head, wouldn't be too placid as he awaited the mate's researches.

By the after break of the long midship superstructure there showed the white blur of Claire Kane's uniform skirt below a coat. Claire, mother hen to five small assorted refugees, would want a report, too. Nobody was going to put over anything on her passengers, even if they weren't really patients.

Rock Barclay knew that Mr. Rice was also conscious of the girl's unobtrusive presence. When Rock climbed over the taffrail to peer in under the overhang the mate was quick to follow him. Mr. Rice hung precariously, leveling his flashlight with one hand.

This time the mate's light picked up something besides water. There was a huge baulk of timber under the counter and with it a snarl of thick steel wire. And there was something—an unbelievable, ugly thing. A weed-covered, barnacle-spotted globular metal object. It was within five feet of the *Benjy's* plates and sometimes nearer.

The mate's breath came out of him audibly. He kept the light on it, as if the light would steady the thing's lurchings in the swell. His eyes came up to Rock Barclay's.

"Yeah," said Rock Barclay. "It's got horns but it's no cow."

"A mine," said Mr. Rice in a rusty voice. "A contact mine."

"IT WEIGHS as much as a small sedan an' there's more'n a quarter of a ton of nitro in it," said Mr. Barclay out of knowledge gained on a minesweeper. "It was the timber an' wire that scraped us. The minute that can starts rubbin' horns it'll take the stern out of her like you'd pull the heel off a loaf o' bread."

Mr. Rice studied the distance of the mine from the *Benjy's* rudder. He began to climb back over the rail. He moved deliberately, with a firm eye on Rock Barclay.

"This is one for the Old Man," he said. "That thing's snarled with the timber."

Mr. Barclay nodded. "The cable could be the mine pennant, if they don't moor 'em with chain. Whatever it is, it's foul of our propeller shaft. The egg is there to stay."

He took the flashlight that the mate thrust at him and his eyes wandered unhappily toward Claire Kane.

Mr. Rice was already heading for the girl. He scooped her slender body along with a masterful sweep of his arm, urging her forward.

Rock Barclay rumbled in his throat. Here was a girl who stuck her neck out in war zones and had the bad luck to do it on a ship that had a snaky grass widower for a mate. Mr. Rice was worse for that girl than the mine could be. Rock did not follow the mate; he began to rout out the firemen and watertenders who bunked in the poop. They came tumbling out with sleepy oaths. Mr. Barclay prodded them forward to safer spots with words and shoves, giving no explanation.

But somehow they guessed. Fear came down on that ship like a cold fog.

Stubbornly Rock returned to the taffrail. He knew a guy who had been in minelayers wouldn't be expected by the other hands to go cold about a mine. To Rock that reasoning was all wrong. But he couldn't change it so he had to stick. He found himself treading gingerly on the iron deck plates. He forced himself to dig his heels in. A sudden blast ought to be easier to take than trying to stay afloat in a lifeboat against a gale of wind. He knew the wind was coming.

Of a sudden, turning from an inspection of the mine, which was swaying like a cobra's head under the stern, he found himself facing Claire.

"Shall I get them dressed?" she asked.

Rock Barclay was no hand at slipping an arm around a girl's waist and drawing her gently away from danger. But he did get a quick grip on her knees, slung her over his shoulder and carried her, kicking indignantly, forward amidst the wondering blackgang.

"Yes," he said, thumping her feet down on deck. "Get 'em dressed—plenty. Call it a mine drill, if you know the words for it in their languages. But keep 'em forward—well forward—an' off the open deck. Stay there yourself. We'll be busy."

A SUDDEN thought struck him. He went to Chris Pendleton's room in the after end of the deckhouse. The

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Suddenly the sea roared, throwing a terrible geyser over the ship

same instinct that had sent Rock to the bridge probably would have sent Pendleton to the engine-room. He glanced in.

Pendleton was there, lying in his bunk. His eyes were open.

"What's up?" he asked, sitting up suddenly.

"Kid, you got a break," Rock said. "There's a mine tangled up in our wheel but it's hot from Santa Claus for you."

"A mine!" Pendleton hit the floor and began to slide into his clothes. His fingers were fast but uncertain.

"It's a job for me, since I know 'em, an' for you, since the blackgang rates bein' present on any monkey business to the propeller," Rock said. "You'll be a hero, kid. They'll name islands after you an' Claire will—"

"A mine under the counter!" Pendleton muttered. His fingers went up to pick at the short hairs of his mustache. "Why a thing like that—it wouldn't leave enough of a man at close quarters to see him. It—it would tear him into shreds—into—"

"Not so loud!" said Rock. He was reasonable about this. You couldn't expect that when you woke up a sensitive fellow in the dark and practically dumped a one-ton mine in his lap he wouldn't get a little upset about it. "You'll feel better with your pants on."

"We ought to launch the boats," said the junior engineer. "You knock the stern out of this ship and she'll slide under so fast you'd never get the davit falls clear—"

Rock Barclay grabbed him by the arms.

"I been tryin' to tell you," he said. "This mine's a dud, see? I know, I've laid 'em an' swept 'em. She's drifted so long she's rusted up solid. You couldn't detonate her with a sledgehammer."

Fervently he hoped that this sounded convincing.

"A dud," said Chris Pendleton. He stood still. The lie had helped. "You're sure?"

"Do I know mines?" said Rock. This sensitive young fellow wasn't really awake yet. "Am I goin' under there myself? O' course it's a dud."

"Okay, then," said Pendleton. "You understand, I'll take any reasonable risk but a live mine—"

"Sure, sure," said Rock. "I feel the same way. Come on."

He hustled Pendleton aft. He felt as if he were walking up hill. He had another look at the mine. It hadn't changed position much.

While it was drifting freely in the sea the stiff steel

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wire had held it clear of the big timber. But now, with the wire entangled in the screw, the mine would let go if it touched either the ship or the timber.

It was a mess. Mr. Barclay decided that the floating timber with its dangling wire had swept that mine like a drag.

CAPTAIN GUNSSEN, escorted by Mr. Rice, came tramping woodenly aft. Rock's flashlight briefly showed the Old Man's lugubrious face. The skipper was even sorer on the world than usual; jamming mines under his counter was an unworthy trick of fate. Nevertheless Gunssen, as skipper of the ship, had come glumly aft to be blown to blazes, if necessary, as seagoing conventions dictated.

With him was the chief engineer, Mr. Smiley, a Tyneside man, naturalized but still hopelessly and proudly British.

"A mine, eh?" said Mr. Smiley, greatly casual. "A pity the bally thing didn't wait until the Fourth of July to hook us, eh, what? All that noise on the wrong day!"

Rock Barclay moved restlessly. This mob of heroes was killing the act. Pendleton had to stick out.

Captain Gunssen cursed. He planted his legs, wide apart. "You have been in the sweepers, Mr. Barclay," he said in his precise English. "What do you suggest?"

Looking past him, Rock caught a glimpse of Claire's white skirt. The girl was up on the lighted saloon deck, at the break of the deckhouse. She was carrying a suitcase and hurrying a man and woman forward.

"I know mines," said Rock. "I c'n handle this one. I've handled plenty." He laughed. "Why a chunk of a mine once hit me on the chest. It bounced off and killed a couple o' guys."

Nobody laughed. Chris Pendleton shifted his feet restively. Rock got down to business.

"I need a good man to help me—somebody who's handy with tools an' can be trusted," he said. "Mr. Pendleton's volunteered. He's right for the job."

Mr. Rice started like a whipped thoroughbred. He was a quick-thinking man. "Pendleton. Why, you double-cross—" he began furiously.

"Please!" said Captain Gunssen. His voice rasped. "You are in charge, Mr. Barclay. You want what?"

Rapidly Mr. Barclay detailed his needs—tools, lights, lines, stage to work on, collision mats, fenders.

"And everybody forward," he added. "I'm not figuring on allowing this mine to let go but I'm not promisin' anything. A couple get the stuff. Then all hands forward but Pendleton and me!"

Captain Gunssen looked into the black night to windward. The eyes of Mr. Rice and Mr. Barclay followed his understandingly. A stiff puff of wind had whirled in over the port quarter. The breeze was picking up. It wouldn't take too much wind to put a short, choppy sea on top of that broad swell. And once that mine began dancing under the *Benjy's* quarter. . . . Captain Gunssen led the way forward to get what Rock Barclay wanted.

"You're sure it's a dud?" Chris Pendleton asked him softly.

"You heard me right the first time," said Rock Barclay. "But we got to act like it was hot. I don't want any wrong moves out o' you when we're down under that overhang."

THE stuff came aft quickly. Nobody wasted time in the stern. Lights were slung under the counter. Forward a stage was being rigged. Rock didn't wait for it. In a bosun's chair he was lowered under the stern. Chris Pendleton, laden with tools, followed in another chair.

Going down, Rock felt a twinge of conscience about Pendleton. But it didn't last long. He couldn't do the job without a helper. And in war zones every guy has got to wash his own shirt.

What Rock Barclay saw at close range made him change his elaborate plans fast. The mine was too close to the ship. Down on the restless surface of the sea he sensed that the weather wasn't going to let him get dressy about that job. The sea was kicking up and the huge round mass of steel was responding, as active as a fat man on a dance floor. She'd hit and hit hard and soon. That was a mathematical certainty.

Mr. Barclay shivered under the impact of cold water when a lunge of the *Benjy* dipped him deep. He estimated the situation. No time or chance to work on detonators. The mine lunged toward the *Benjy's* hidden propeller and Mr. Barclay stopped thinking and breathing. His nerve, he decided, was not nearly as good as it once had been.

"It doesn't—look so rusty," said Chris Pendleton. His teeth were chattering. But that could be cold, not fear. He was wet, too, on his swinging seat.

Rock didn't answer. He had made a discovery. There was a chain or another wire dangling under the mine. That was what was fouled on the visible wire to the timber.

To free the propeller shaft of the wire wound on it was a long job requiring a shift of trim. To cut the wire hawser between the propeller shaft and the mine was shorter. That would set the mine and the timber clear of the ship, free to continue on their evil way.

"Hacksaw!" said Rock Barclay. "Gi' me that hacksaw, Pendleton. Have blades handy. I'm not goin' to be saving blades."

In his swinging seat he went for that wire. He picked the coil highest out of the water. That coil was not far out—not out at all when the big swell lifted the water or the sea on top of it launched a hissing crest. Mr. Barclay sawed.

He kept sawing. He was vaguely conscious of the mine, dancing its coquettish, deadly dance among propeller blades, rudder, ship's plates and timber. The spot he had picked was near it. Sometimes it touched him. But a man's strength was not enough to fend off that thing, nor would cork fenders or collision mat help in time. The sea was rising, spurring on the antics of the mine.

Mr. Barclay sawed. The bosun's chair interfered with his efforts. He put a line under his armpits and slid off the seat to get to grips with that wire. He curled a leg around it. He sawed and when the choppy water would let him he breathed. But always he sawed, with an iron band getting tighter and tighter around his heart as his will drove his body past its strength and endurance.

He sawed for the ship and he sawed for Claire Kane's life. God forgive him as a seaman, he thought in the blurred course of that berserk sawing; he was shoving that blade across the tough strands of steel harder for Claire Kane's life than for his ship. He knew that, or maybe he only fancied it in his dizzy mind. But he kept seeing her; and he knew then how vividly Chris Pendleton had seen torn flesh. It was hell, the occasional touch of that mine.

THE stiff, severed strands had a devilish way of cutting his hand and of jamming themselves like brakes against the flat of the saw blade. But those things couldn't matter. An erratic lunge of the mine suddenly twisted the wire. It dragged him under and put the spot he was working on deeper in the jumping water. Another coil raised temptingly above the surface. He could see it. Staring, he realized that he saw it not by the light of the swinging cargo clusters but by the sullen gray of day.

He snatched the other hacksaw from Chris Pendleton's cold hand and went down under after his partly cut wire. He came up to gulp when life demanded air. He sawed that wire.

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He sawed it away, strand after strand, until with a vicious wrench of unsprung steel there was no strand left, no wire left to hold that bobbing, plunging ton of destruction close to the stern of the *Benjy*.

For a moment he felt helpless, lost, without anything left to saw. Then he realized and lifted his husky voice in a croak of triumph that stung his salt-caked throat.

Already the mine, and the timber with it, was edging away from the ship. The *Benjy*, broadside on, was going down wind faster than the deadly wreckage.

Rescuers came aft. They hauled up Chris Pendleton and Rock Barclay. Freeing the propeller shaft could wait a bit. Chris was blue in the morning light—blue with cold and heroism, he looked to Rock. Mr. Rice, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his great coat, looked merely gray and sour when Rock Barclay grabbed Pendleton's blue hand in his bleeding fingers and wrung it heartily. For by that time Claire Kane was there, unforbidden. Her eyes were grave and tender.

"It—was nothing," said Chris Pendleton.

"It was a lot," said Claire.

The boy had guts, Rock Barclay thought, to last out that long under the overhang even if he did think the mine was a dud. He had guts—enough guts—sure. He looked out over the breaking seas at the mine and the timber and then looked again, more sharply.

The cutting of the wire had changed the grim partnership of mine and timber. Or perhaps it was the distance. At any rate it seemed to Rock as if the mine was right alongside that heavy bulk of timber. The fat round globe seemed to be nuzzling confidingly against the timber. A wave lifted the horned mine and Rock Barclay opened his mouth.

Of a sudden the sea roared terribly and opened up. In an instant the whole surface of the ocean was lost to Rock Barclay's staring eyes. Nothingness—gray nothingness—succeeded. Simultaneously a mighty hand flung him flat on the deck.

He scrambled up and started toward Claire. Then all the water that had been in the sea came down, almost solid, and flattened him on the thundering deck again.

Next time Rock got up, out of rushing water, he made it to the girl. She didn't need any help. She got up by herself.

So did Chris Pendleton. His eyes in his blue face burned accusingly at Rock. He stabbed a finger at Rock.

"You—you said it was a dud!" he said and fainted dead away.

Rock Barclay was embarrassed. He could feel the blood that had been concentrated in his sawing arm and shoulder flooding up his neck and into his face in a rush. He looked away from Claire, feeling bad. And he felt worse when Mr. Rice, with lightning speed, grasped the situation.

"So that's how you did it!" roared Mr. Rice. "You told him it was a dud! That's how you made a hero out of that lily-livered—"

His emotion flooded over into action. He swung his fist with all his might at Rock Barclay's granite jaw.

In his state Rock Barclay hardly felt it. The blow had been too spontaneous to be well aimed. And his jaw had always been a strong point, a tempting target but a deceptive one. This emphasis on him was all wrong. He stood still.

Mr. Rice grabbed his right hand in his left and cradled it, moaning. Rock, with an apprehensive glance at Claire Kane, bent to lift up Chris Pendleton. "He's just overtired," he said. "You don't want to believe anything Chris says. He's a sensitive sort of fellow—that's what he is. A real—"

"What good is a sensitive sort of fellow in a world like this?" demanded Claire Kane, with a lift of her arm to where the mine had been. "How tough am I? I know now."

Her eyes crinkled at Rock. "I need a big, strong, ugly old granite mug to protect me. And whether he likes it or no I'm going to get one, too!"

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Nogales and Caliper pulled their six-shooters covering that lowering giant and his henchmen

Ramrod Ridge

Start now this exciting story of guns and gold in a fabulous corner of the West

By William Colt MacDonald

TO THE little town of Paraiso have come that piously spoken scoundrel, DEACON TRUMBULL and his henchmen, LIMPY BRISTOL and HEDGE FURLOW. They have followed a Mexican named JIMINEZ, for they believe that he holds the secret to a certain thirty thousand dollars in gold lost in the Ramrod Ridge desert country. They string up Jiminez to make him talk; but their torturing is suddenly and violently interrupted.

NOGALES SCOTT is a man of legendary skill with a gun; he is, moreover, the possessor of a large fortune which he is trying his best to give away. So he wanders the countryside with his partner CALIPER MAXWELL, stepping into trouble whenever he sees it. He and Caliper break up Deacon Trumbull's necktie party so efficiently that a few moments later the three outlaws are riding hastily away. They head toward Ramrod Ridge, for the Deacon has a plan which will give him revenge on Nogales Scott and also win him cash rewards. Or so he hopes.

MEANWHILE the grateful Mexican, whom Caliper has decided to call Steve, tells Caliper and Nogales the story of the mysterious thirty thousand dollars in gold. When a gold shipment was held up by outlaws in that section of the California desert called Ramrod Ridge, one man managed to escape from the bandits with the treasure, and he vanished into a box-canyon. Nothing more was heard of him, and that is all Jiminez knows; he knows that much because he worked for a man named ETHAN VINCENT, whose son was the vanished man.

All this sounds interesting to Nogales and Caliper, and they set out for Ramrod Ridge country with Jiminez. It is a fabulous desert, with its palm trees and waterfalls; and it is now haunted by a mysterious wild man. Very shortly Nogales and Caliper are to learn the truth about that wild man.

Sensing watchers, Nogales does some scouting—and walks straight into a gunfight. When it is over, Nogales is the only man still standing, and one of the casualties is a bearded, haggard creature who Nogales realizes must be the wild man. He is badly wounded but still alive; and after a moment Jiminez cries out in amazement that this is FRED VINCENT—the man who disappeared with the gold. . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE MIGHTY ONE

THERE wasn't any excuse for the existence of Ramrod Ridge. In the beginning, when the T.N. & A.S. railroad had planned to construct a line through California, it had seemed a reasonable site for such a settlement. Men poured in, expecting big wages, and the building of houses got under way. Land salesmen talked glibly of the

This story began in last week's Argosy

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big profits to be made, when the rails came through. Speculators bought up acreage, in the expectation that Ramrod Ridge would some day become a metropolis.

It drew its name from a nearby mile-long ridge of sand. Someone remarked that it looked like a ramrod. The name Ramrod Ridge was adopted. And then, abruptly, the T.N. & A.S. company abandoned its plans when the news broke that the Southern Pacific had already commenced construction of a line down through the eastern part of the state. In those days there wasn't enough business, or so the T.N. & A.S. officials considered, to warrant their going through with plans.

That was the end of the boom at Ramrod Ridge. Men left as quickly as they had poured in, leaving behind what practically amounted to a ghost town. Even the long sandy ridge commenced to disappear under the devastating force of vagrant desert winds which shifted the dunes from one section to another from year to year. There remained only a collection of wooden shacks, the General Store and the single dusty main street. Oh, yes, and Simon Crawford, owner of the General Store. Crawford always said he was too fat to make another move, but his intimates knew better. Where there was easy money to be picked up, there was found Simon Crawford.

In time, with Crawford's assistance, Ramrod Ridge became known as a mecca for law-busters. There wasn't any law in the town. Law-busters stopped there, feeling secure that they wouldn't be molested by peace officers, or that, at least, Crawford would give them ample warning and assist in their getaways. Meanwhile, so long as such crooks stayed, Crawford was more than willing to help them dispose of their money, and to act as a sort of "fence," handling their stolen goods. Sometimes such goods consisted of pilfered jewels, marked bank notes, rustled cattle; in short, Crawford was interested in anything in which he might turn a dishonest penny.

His general store had a private back room for his intimates. The big outer room carried an ample stock of supplies at one side and there was a bar on the opposite. As for the empty board shacks in the town—anybody was welcome to use them, so long as he gained Crawford's permission. Crawford had set himself up as a sort of a boss in Ramrod Ridge. Mostly the shacks provided stopping-off places for bandits, holdup men, stage robbers and rustlers. Wanted men were sure of sanctuary there. Now and then honest prospectors stopped off for a day or so in one of the shacks and replenished their supplies at the general store. These too were welcome, so long as they minded their own business.

Occasionally one of the small sheepherders from up in the hills came into town for supplies. Within a radius of twenty or thirty miles there were small cattle outfits whose punchers at rare intervals dropped in for a drink or some canned goods. But it wasn't considered good cow country thereabouts in those days. Water was too scarce for one thing; fodder for another. And yet these small outfits managed to exist.

All of Crawford's stock was hauled in by freighters from San Rivedino, the county seat. That was expensive hauling and Crawford charged accordingly. As a matter of fact he even charged for water from the well back of his building. It was a good well; there was no danger of it ever running dry. But it was the only well in Ramrod Ridge.

The only other water in the vicinity was back about two or three miles from the shabby town, and flowed in a cool stream from the waterfall in Quithatz Canyon across the acreage owned by old Ethan Vincent. Vincent had taken up the land many years before Ramrod Ridge came into existence; with Indian labor he had laid out and built his house as well as the canal that carried the water from Quithatz—water which, until Vincent's plans came to fruition, had flowed out into the desert to seep out of sight into the sandy waste.

Simon Crawford had many objectives, but one stood out foremost in his mind: Some day, by hook or crook—probably the latter—he would own old Vincent's property. At present he was well on his way to achieving that objective.

There weren't any honest customers in his general store at the moment—just men who worked for or with him. One was Deacon Trumbull who lounged at the bar with a glass of whiskey in one hand. Hedge Furlow stood next to the Deacon and beside Furlow was Limpy Bristol. Farther down the long bar were half a dozen men in corduroys or denims, wearing battered sombreros and six-shooters. The bartender serving them was well described in certain reward dodgers circulating at present throughout Montana.

Crawford himself lounged in a big arm-chair not far from the bar. He weighed in the vicinity of three hundred pounds. His jowls bulged over his soiled white collar; his double chin hid from view part of the black string tie he affected. His tiny pig eyes were almost lost in creases of fat; the mouth was a thin straight cruel line. He wore a fancy vest, striped trousers and flat heeled boots. His coat was of the type known as a Prince Albert. He was nearly bald, though a few wisps of stringy brown hair were plastered across the top of his huge head. He looked flabby but he wasn't; he was strong as an ox and nearly as huge. At present the gun-belt about his big waist had been loosened to allow ample expansion of his girth.

The Deacon stood facing Crawford, elbows resting back of him on the edge of the bar. ". . . and it seems to me," the Deacon was saying, "that you should make up your mind right soon, Simon." The words didn't carry to the far end of the bar where the other men stood. Only Furlow and Bristol were listening in on the conversation. The Deacon added, "I sort of look for them hombres to reach here nigh any day."

"Might be," Crawford conceded weightily. His heavy voice seemed to well up from the depths of his ponderous body. "At the same time I ain't no hankerin' to make up my mind about things, until I've seen these fellers. Maybe this Maxwell and Scott has got money—"

"No doubt about that," Furlow put in.

"But that's no sign we could get it as easy as you say."

"The Deacon's scheme ought to work," Bristol put in eagerly. "We can make friends with 'em, like the Deacon said. After they've hung around with us a month or so, it should be easy enough to bump 'em off. Then the Deacon forges Scott's name to a will and we collect."

"I know, I know," Crawford rumbled impatiently. "You've said all that before. But I want to see these hombres first. Now quit picking at me."

"Sure, Simon, sure," the Deacon said hastily, recognizing the danger signs. "We won't say another word." He and his two companions gave their attention to drinks standing on the bar.

Crawford glowered at the backs of the three a moment,

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then gazed ominously toward the farther group of men at the bar. "You, Pilcher," he growled heavily. "You said you wanted to talk to me. What's up?"

A loose-jointed individual with an unshaven lantern jaw rocked up and stood before Crawford. His face was flushed with drink and he looked angry. "I'll tell you what's up," he commenced, when Crawford raised one huge hand to stop him.

"Wait," Crawford said, and the heavy tones carried a sneer. "I'll tell *you* what's happened."

By this time everyone in the room was watching.

CRAWFORD went on, "Three months ago you came here with twenty cows you'd picked up from one of the coast outfits. Stolen cows! I told you I figured I could get five bucks a head for 'em, and I gave you a hundred dollars gold. Now, I suppose when you passed through San Rivedino today, you learned, some way, that I got ten bucks apiece for them cows. Now you want more more money. Am I right?"

"You're damn right you're right! I ain't going to be cheated. I figure you should split that other hundred with me—and you're going to do it!"

Crawford's small eyes rested on Pilcher, before he spoke. "You, Pilcher," Crawford's voice was dangerously calm, "you're new around here. Maybe you don't understand my ways."

"You cheated me out of my rightful profits."

"Call it that if you like." Crawford shrugged his shoulders and the movement was something like a mountain shuddering under the force of an earthquake. "The fact remains that you get no more money from me. Now go back to your drink and shut up!"

Pilcher's face crimsoned. He burst out, "You can't do that to me—"

Then Crawford moved. The man's speed was unbelievable as he surged up from his arm-chair, took one quick, light-footed step. His right fist flailed through the air, catching Pilcher just below the left ear. The impact was like the kick of a mule. There came a sickening, cracking sound, as Pilcher was lifted from his feet by the savage force of that blow and flung several yards before his limp body struck the floor. He lay without movement.

There wasn't a sound in the room now. Without a backward glance at his victim, Crawford turned toward his arm-chair again and wedged his bulk between its arms after gathering up the gun and cartridge belt he'd dropped when rising.

"So falleth the wrath of the mighty one," the Deacon murmured.

Crawford glared at him and the Deacon shut up.

Limpy Bristol and a couple of others went to examine Pilcher. After a moment Bristol glanced up. "I think you've broke his neck, Simon."

Crawford gestured. "A couple of you hombres get him out of here. If he should be able to travel by night, make it clear he ain't wanted in Ramrod Ridge. If he's all through traveling—well, you know what to do."

Two men stepped quickly forward and carried out the limp form.

"A hasty temper," the Deacon said sweetly, "is a bad thing to possess, but a good thing to keep."

"Never got me in any trouble," Crawford rumbled, "losing it."

"It might, some day," Limpy Bristol pointed out. "Suppose Pilcher ain't hurt bad. He's going to be mad when he comes to. For revenge he might bring some law authorities here and—"

"In the first place," Crawford said scornfully, "he'd be afraid of cutting his own throat if he done that. In the second, supposin' he did, I'd just deny it. There ain't ary man here what's got the nerve to cross me up."

His small eyes glinted swiftly about the room. The men at the bar watching him suddenly turned back to their drinks. After a few minutes, normal conversation was resumed. Pilcher wasn't mentioned again. An hour slowly passed. The two men who had taken Pilcher out returned after a time. They didn't say anything; Crawford's first glance had warned them to keep silent.

Suddenly Hedge Furlow lifted his head. "Sounds like somebody running the hoofs off'n a hawss," he offered. The room listened. The sounds of drumming hoofs came closer. A man stepped to the broad porch fronting the general store. In an instant he was back. "It's Ten-spot Nance, boss!" he announced.

"What's bringing him back in a rush?" Crawford grunted. "He was with Tim Church and Jack Schmidt. Ain't they along?"

"Ten-spot's alone and riding like all the devils in hell was ridin' his horse's tail," the man said.

The Deacon offered quietly, "I don't exactly like the sound of that. Maybe I can make a guess—"

"Hush up your caterwaulin', Deacon," Crawford said.

The Deacon hushed. The sounds of running hoofs came nearer, then halted before the general store. Flying dust floated through the open doorway. There was the noise of booted feet on the porch and Ten-spot Nance rushed in. He was a mustached individual of medium height with eyes set too close together.

"Boss!" he cried, panting hard. "There's hell to pay! We nearly had young Vincent, when Jiminez showed up with—"

"I knew I could make a guess," the Deacon said wearily. "Coming events cast their shadows before. Scott and Maxwell butted in and—"

"Damn you, hush," Crawford bellowed. "I want to hear what's happened."

CHAPTER VII

YOU TALK TROUBLE

"IT'S just like I've been telling you," the Deacon said, some time later. "Scott and Maxwell are bad medicine, Simon. You won't be able to push them around like you do the rest of us fellers."

"Never pushed you around none," Crawford rumbled peevishly. And added quickly, "That ain't meanin' I wouldn't, was I a mind to." The Deacon didn't say anything. Crawford continued, "I still don't understand, Ten-spot, how this Nogales Scott hombre downed both Schmidt and Church. They were both right good with their shootin'-irons."

"That's the way it was." Nance shrugged his shoulders.

"What were you doing?" Crawford demanded.

"I went to get a horse," Nance explained glibly. "I figured that maybe Vincent wa'n't dead, and if I could get him back here, you could question him like you've been wanting to—"

"You're sure for certain it was Vincent?"

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"It's him. He ain't shaved for months and his hair's white—"

"And you ran to get a horse to bring him to me?"

"That's it, boss. I figured sure that Tim and Jack could handle this Scott hombre before his pals got—"

"You're a liar," Crawford rapped out savagely. "You run for a horse so you could hightail it. Don't lie to me, Nance."

"You wouldn't figure I was yellow—"

"Figured that a long spell back," Crawford said heavily. He gave a deep sigh. "I still don't see what Vincent was pulling that wild-man stuff for. If it was really him, why didn't he go home to his father's place?"

"Probably not him," the Deacon interposed. "I wish I could have got a look at him once—"

Crawford interrupted, "I wish you could. It's like I told you, some of the Indians around here spotted him at a distance, once or twice, and claimed it was Vincent. Then I sent out Schmidt, Church and Nance to comb the hills. They spied him a couple of times. This was when you went over to Arizona in search of Jiminez."

"If they spied him," the Deacon wanted to know, "why didn't they grab him?"

"Cripes!" Nance put in, "that wild man was wilder'n a locoed bronc. We couldn't get near enough. We could have plugged him, maybe, but Simon wanted him alive. Then today he bust down on us and started shooting. We had to shoot back, or the crazy fool would have wiped us out. Then Scott came charging up the hill and—"

"And you snuk off with your tail between your legs," Crawford growled. "All right, you told us that before. Go get a drink and shut up." Nance slunk off to the bar.

Crawford said to the Deacon, "If Jiminez recognized the wild man as Fred Vincent—if he is Vincent—I figure he'll bring him to his father's place as soon as possible. Either him or his body. That being the case, Jiminez will be coming through here. And Scott and Maxwell with him. We'll wait."

AN HOUR passed. By this time the sun had dropped low; long shadows streaked the dusty main street of Ramrod Ridge. Then the man Crawford had posted as lookout at the doorway of the general store saw three riders leading two loaded ponies, making their through the sea of creosote bush that surrounded the town. The lookout hastened inside to tell Crawford.

"They're comin'," he announced. "Looks like they got Schmidt and Church tied across one horse. On the other, it must be that wild man. I figure he's tied in his saddle, 'cause he's all slumped down like he couldn't fork it proper."

Crawford raised one huge paw to signify he had heard, but he didn't say anything. Gradually, the men in the store gravitated toward the outside porch, until only the Deacon and Crawford remained inside. Pretty soon the creaking of saddle leather was heard; then the Deacon caught Nogales' voice: "Yes, you keep going, Steve. Get Vincent home to his dad as fast as you can."

"But Señor Nogales, maybee eet is bes' I remain weeth you and the Señor Caliper."

"Get going," Caliper's voice chimed in. "There won't anything happen here that we can't handle. . . . Look, Nogales, it looks like a reception committee, here."

By this time there was a buzz of voices on the store porch. Somebody protested at the leading away of the horse bearing Vincent's still unconscious body: "Hey, that Mex is taking Jack Schmidt's horse!"

Then Nogales' voice again, "The horse will be returned, hombre—"

Further words were drowned in surprised and angry cries at sight of the other bodies.

"Deacon," Crawford rumbled, "you go out there and tell those two hombres I want to see 'em."

The Deacon looked troubled. "It won't do no good, Simon. I know they won't come."

"Do as I tell you!"

"I'd just be wasting my breath. You can't order them two around. They're not that kind."

Crawford swore and lifted his mighty bulk from the arm-chair. He moved slowly to the doorway and out on the porch, where he pushed aside those who impeded his way.

At his arrival, with the Deacon close behind, the men on the porch fell silent. Nogales and Caliper still sat their saddles, their horses drawn up close to the porch, which was elevated above the earth. To their rear was a third horse to which had been roped the bodies of Jack Schmidt and Tim Church. Jiminez was already some distance down the main street, leading Schmidt's horse with the unconscious Vincent lashed in the saddle. Once Jiminez looked back; Nogales urged him on with a wave of the hand. Then Nogales and Caliper turned to stare at Crawford who stood looking at them, a heavy frown on his face. The men were silent, waiting for Crawford to speak. Still Crawford didn't say anything.

NOGALES spoke cheerfully to Caliper, "Cripes, Steve said he was big, but he didn't even mention the word mammoth."

"There's our old friend the Deacon, too," Caliper grinned. "And Furlow and Limpy Bristol. Well, well, what a reception committee—not to mention that one feller who's a crowd all by himself. Imagine him coming out here to say hello."

Nogales chuckled, "Know something, pard?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is just the right time," Nogales continued, "for the Deacon to pull that old saying about the mountain coming to Mahomet."

A sour look settled on Crawford's fleshy features. "You two," he rumbled, "what do you want here?"

"Just passing through, mister," Caliper said meekly, "and figured to drop this dead meat off at your door. I understand these two worked for you. By the way, Nogales, do you see the feller that had the wings on his heels?"

Nogales pointed toward Ten-spot Nance. "That looks like him, though he was leaving so fast I don't think he could stop this soon."

"You listen to me, you two," Crawford thundered. "Those two never worked for me. I don't know anything about 'em. And don't get lippy. As for passing through—well, I say who'll pass through Ramrod Ridge and who won't. Where you heading for?"

Nogales said coldly. "That's none of your damn business, though you probably know we're heading for the Vincent place."

"Now, young feller, don't get smart. You might get too smart and then you'd be sorry. I'm trying to be friendly. Now just calm down a mite. Did I hear somebody say

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something about Jiminez taking young Vincent home?"

"You might have," Nogales said noncommittally, and added, "If your ears are as big as your carcass."

Crawford let that pass, though his frown deepened. "Where'd you find him?" he asked.

"I reckon one of your own men has already told you," Nogales said quietly.

"Damned if I know what you're hinting at," Crawford said, assuming a cordial tone of voice. "What did Vincent have to say?"

"You really interested?" Caliper asked seriously.

"Certain I am," Crawford grunted. "I've known that boy for a long spell. We've all worried about him, wondered what had happened to him. Why I even spent good money sending Deacon Trumbull clear to Arizona. You see, I had an idea that that Mex, Jiminez, knew something about him. But the Deacon couldn't get a word out of the Mex. Oh, yes, that's right, you and the Deacon have met before. Now I recollect he told me about it. That was all a misunderstanding. But I'm interruptin'. What did young Vincent have to say?"

"Well," Caliper drawled, "he told us that when we got over this way, we'd see two big mountains, one called San Jacinto and the other ran the general store."

Blood crimsoned Crawford's huge face. He started to speak, stammered, then fell silent, choking down certain orders that had risen to his lips. Behind him, Deacon Trumbull whispered, "How about it, Simon? Say the word and I'll set the boys on them. We can wipe them out—"

"No, you fool," Crawford muttered. "They may know something. We've got to go slow." He again faced Caliper and Nogales who were openly laughing now.

Forcing a thin smile, Crawford said, "That may be funny to you boys, but my size is no comfort to me. Look, I'm trying to be friendly. I don't want to make enemies. But you've got to meet me half way. Now I could stop you from entering this town—"

Caliper said, "You just think you could."

"Now, don't get huffy," Crawford protested. "I'm telling you what I could do. I'm the boss here. One word from me and you'll never see another sunrise. But—"

Nogales drawled languidly, "I'm not familiar with California."

Crawford frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Nogales explained, "I mean I don't know what your code is here, but back where we come from, that's fighting talk! If you want trouble, you can have it. But we're going through Ramrod Ridge and we're not waiting for your permission. Get that straight. All right, Caliper!"

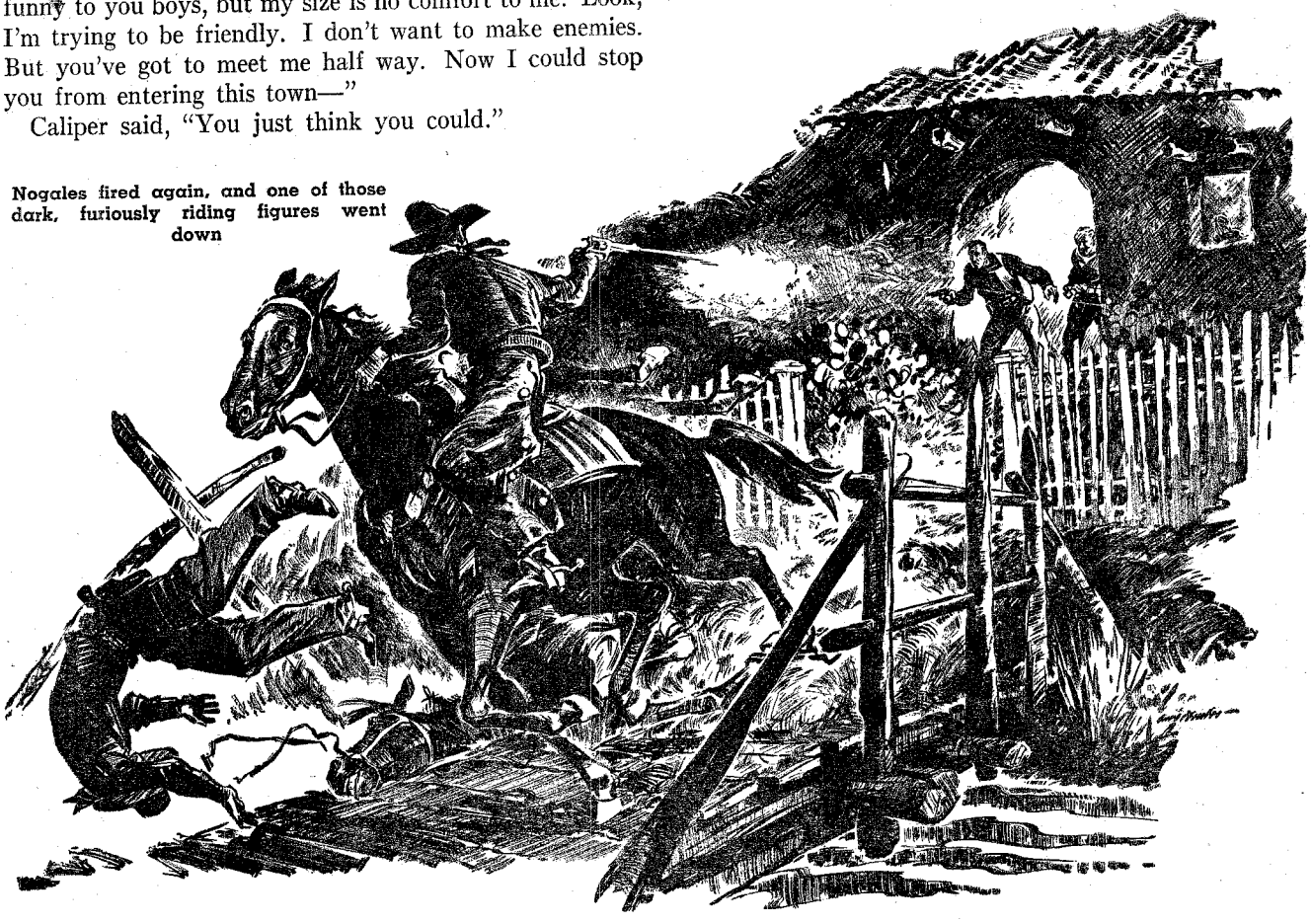
At his word, both cowboys pulled their six-shooters and covered the men on the porch. Arms shot hastily into the air. There was a sudden thundered protest from Crawford, to which Nogales and Caliper paid not the slightest attention.

Nogales went on, "We're not taking chances of being shot in the back when we leave here. Sorry to do it this way, but we're outnumbered and we can't take chances. Now, you hombres, get back in that building and close the door. When that's done, you can unleash your lead or do as you see fit, but right now, move!"

The men on the porch were quick to get the idea. They lost no time getting inside the building. Only Simon Crawford remained on the porch, eyeing them defiantly and shaking one huge fist at them. "By God!" he bellowed, "I'll not forget this!"

"An elephant never forgets!" Caliper shouted.

The two cowboys wheeled their ponies, touched spurs to the animals' ribs and raced out of town in the direction Jiminez had taken. No shots followed them from the general store. The men had been waiting for Simon Crawford to give the order and Crawford still stood as



Nogales fired again, and one of those dark, furiously riding figures went down

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before, his face crimson with anger and one raised, knotted fist shaking insanely after Caliper and Nogales.

CHAPTER VIII

GONE AWAY-GOLD

BACK on the desert floor the sun still blazed, but here, on higher ground, the towering mountain peaks shadowed that fierce heat. Ramrod Ridge was nearly three miles to the rear by this time. Caliper and Nogales had drawn their ponies to a walk that took them through a miniature forest composed of mesquite and palo verde trees, with occasional clumps of catclaw and creosote bush. They were following a well defined but little used trail. Ahead, bordering the way, they came upon a double line of cottonwoods. On either side of the cottonwoods was a big fig-tree orchard.

"Can't tell what might happen in this California country," Caliper was saying. "After seeing those palm trees, I'm ready to believe anything. Imagine stepping off the desert and finding yourself by a cool stream with palms shading you overhead!"

"I know The whole dang country seems twisted around. I reckon that stream and those palms go to make up one of these cases like you read about in the Bible."

"O-aces, huh? Mebbyso. Me, I haven't read in the Bible for quite some spell now—and I'd like to know when you ever did."

"It's quite a few years back, but I got a good memory." Nogales growled, "Lemme see—it's something about being brought into a good land of brooks of water that spring out of the hills—a land of wheat and barley and fig trees—or something like that. I forget the rest."

"There's the house," Caliper announced suddenly.

Nogales' gaze followed the direction in which Caliper pointed and, above the tops of the fig trees, he could see the Vincent place, situated on slightly higher ground. The slope of a huge mountain rose gradually at the rear of the building.

Ten minutes later they were riding through the gateway of the white fence that enclosed the house, having crossed a wooden bridge over an irrigation ditch. The house was of adobe, with a long gallery running its full width. There was a sort of garden plot on either side of the gravel path that led to the entrance, planted with cacti of various kinds—prickly pear, cholla, visnaga and well known fishhook cactus, ocostillo and Spanish dagger; also several geraniums with bright red blossoms.

An Indian worked steadily with a rake about the plants. He glanced up as Caliper and Nogales passed through the gateway and pointed toward a stable at one side, toward which they headed their ponies.

There were other buildings scattered about, also of adobe with tile roofs; a sort of barracks where the help lived, a tool shed and two or three other miscellaneous structures. At the stable entrance a second Indian, dressed like the first in overalls and denim shirt, a bandanna around his head, greeted the two cowboys in Spanish and told them he would take care of their horses. Nearby stood the two ponies Jiminez had brought to the house; the Indian had been engaged in rubbing them down when Caliper and Nogales arrived. Palo verde trees grew in profusion about the buildings, giving the place an air of peace.

"Darned nice layout Vincent's got," Caliper commented, as he and Nogales made their way back toward the front of the house.

"Sure is. I even hate to think of that Crawford hombre being in this same neighborhood."

AT THAT moment Jiminez hailed them from the long front gallery of the house. Another man stood at Jiminez' side, a tall, spare, clean-shaven man with a wealth of bushy white hair and steel-blue eyes with tiny wrinkles at their corners. He too was in denim overalls and woolen shirt and cowboy boots.

Nogales and Caliper mounted the stone steps to the flag-paved gallery where Jiminez introduced them to Ethan Vincent. Vincent greeted them cordially; his grip was firm and friendly.

"I should have been in the gateway to greet you when you arrived," he said courteously. "Usually my guests receive better treatment, but you'll understand, I hope, that we've all been occupied with Fred."

"Don't let that bother you," Nogales replied. "How is your son?"

Vincent's face was sober. "Not too good, I fear. Oh, his wounds don't worry me. A good doctor could fix them up. But his memory is gone. "

"He's conscious then?" Caliper asked.

Vincent nodded. "We got him right to bed when Estaban brought him home. I did what I could for him. Polly—my daughter—is with him now. Yes, he regained consciousness, but he doesn't seem to know us. His eyes follow us about the room; they look puzzled."

"Eet is," Jiminez put in, "like he was try so hard to remembair. At firs', hees eyes look very frighten' like he was terrify. Then when he see hees *padre* and the Señorita Polly, he give the great sigh and that frighten' look go way."

"That's something, anyway," Nogales said. "Now if we can just get the doctor here, we'll have him fixed up in no time, I'll bet. There's no doctor in Ramrod Ridge, I suppose."

"None at all." Vincent looked dubious. "The nearest is at San Rivedino. I'd like to have old Doc Stebbings, but it's a long drive here and back. I can't ask Stebbings to give up his practice for three or four days. I know he can't afford that. There are too many young doctors in San Rivedino ready to take over his practice. Oh, I know Stebbings would do it in a minute if I sent word for him to come, but—"

"Shucks!" Nogales said. "It's just a matter of money—"

"Yes," Vincent agreed hopelessly, "a matter of money—money I haven't got. And I won't ask Stebbings to come all the way here for nothing. Tomorrow, if Fred is rested, I plan to put him in a wagon and drive him to Rivedino."

He paused, looking somewhat surprised at Nogales who had apparently lost interest in the conversation and had stepped off to one side where he was engaged with an indelible pencil and a small worn leather folder. Within a few moments Nogales had returned and handed a slip of gray paper to Vincent.

Vincent glanced at the paper, frowned, then raised his eyes to Nogales. "What—what's this?" he stammered.

"My banker in Chicago told me to write one out whenever I needed money," Nogales replied carelessly. "He called it a check or a draft, or some such word. I reckon

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it works all right, 'cause I've used those papers a lot and I never had any money refused me yet. You just send that in to Doc Stebbings and tell him you expect him to stay here until Fred is on his feet."

"But I can't let you do this," Vincent protested.

"All right," Nogales snapped, "I'm asking you to use some sense. You're doing it for your son. You know he can't stand a trip in a wagon. It's all right to be prideful, but there're times when too much pride is a bad thing. I don't need that money; I've got more than I can use. Now think it over, but get that money to Stebbings as soon as possible, is all I ask."

"Nogales—" Vincent commenced, then choked up. Finally he found his voice. "All right, I'll gladly accept this. You'll get it back some day."

"The sooner you get word to Doc Stebbings," Nogales cut in, "the sooner he'll get here."

"But this is too much money."

"Not if Stebbings does his job, it isn't."

Vincent nodded. "I'll write a note to him at once and send it with this check by Juan. Juan acts as my major-domo. He's a good rider. He'll get to San Rivedino and—"

AT THAT moment a girl stepped through the house doorway. She was tall and slim with her father's blue eyes; her hair was black as jet and done in a knot at her nape. She wore a loose gown of flowered calico; there was a string of beads at her throat.

"My daughter, Polly," Vincent introduced her. "This is Nogales Scott and Caliper Maxwell. We owe them a great deal—"

"Glad to know you, Miss Polly," Nogales cut in. He liked the firm, cool pressure of the girl's hand. "It wasn't anything, bringing in your brother, so you don't owe us a thing."

"But the doctor," Vincent commenced.

"Yeah, the doctor," Caliper interrupted, while he was shaking hands with Polly. "You'd better get him sent for, Mr. Vincent. You were going to write a note."

"So I was, so I was." The elderly man nodded, turned and hurried into the house. Polly invited the men into the main room, which was tastefully furnished, with goat skins scattered about the tiled floor. The furniture was comfortable. At one end of the room mesquite wood lay ready in the fireplace.

After a time Ethan Vincent entered with word that Juan had saddled and was on his way. Polly rose to leave for her brother's room. Until supper time the four men sat and talked. Vincent told the cowboys something of his past history. Formerly he had owned a cattle ranch in Wyoming. Then, twenty years before when his wife had died and his own health was failing, he had sought the healing effect of the California desert, bringing with him his two motherless children, Polly and Fred.

"I liked this place from the start," Vincent was saying. "There's something healthful in the very air. I hired Indians and the native Mexicans. We built up this place. I planted my fig orchard on the advice of men who knew this country. I have an alfalfa pasture. My herd is very small; we keep just a few cows for milk and beef; back in the hills a short distance I have sheep and a few hogs. There's a chicken-run out back. Some day I plan—at least I used to plan—to plant a citrus orchard."

"Citrus?" Nogales asked.

"Oranges and lemons. Some limes too."

"Here in the desert?" Caliper looked amazed. "Do you figure oranges will grow in this country?"

"They're already growing them, farther north. I feel sure that this desert will grow anything, given the proper water. And I have water. Some day, mark my word, this whole desert valley will bloom with farms and fruit ranches."

Privately, Nogales and Caliper thought Vincent was a little too enthusiastic, but they listened politely to his conversation; it seemed to keep Vincent's mind from his son. Eventually, Polly called them for supper. They entered a comfortable dining room where they were served by an Indian servant. A bottle of wine was produced. "From my own grapes," Vincent said proudly. "You haven't seen my vineyard yet."

AFTER supper they returned to the main room and found seats before the fireplace. "This desert sure chills off at night," Caliper commented. Gradually, Nogales worked the conversation around to Fred Vincent and the missing gold.

"Why, hasn't Esteban told you?" Polly asked, surprised.

"We couldn't get much out of Steve," Nogales said. "I guess he reckoned it wasn't his story to tell, not until you had looked us over."

"I'm think it bes' if the *señorita* tell it," Esteban smiled.

"It can be quickly told," Vincent put in. "Go ahead, Polly. You've got the habit of keeping your facts in a line; I haven't."

"There really isn't much to tell," Polly said. "You see Fred and I have always lived here. Three years back father thought Fred should get some city experience, so he took a job with the Commercial National Bank, in San Diego. Fred became one of their trusted employees. Last September the bank decided to open a branch bank up in San Bernardino. Fred was given the job of transporting thirty thousand dollars in gold to the new bank. He left San Diego with the money in a strong-box, carried on mule-back."

"Alone?" Nogales asked.

Polly shook her head. "He was given a bodyguard of four armed men. The transporting of the gold was supposed to be a secret, but such things leak out. I suppose the very sight of five men riding with a mule packing a strong-box would give the story away. Anyway, when they neared here, Fred decided to drop in for dinner. He hadn't been home for months. We were delighted to see him.

"He and his men left with the gold, late in the day. Sometime after dark, they were ambushed and the bodyguard shot. Three of the bodyguard were killed instantly. The fourth guard, with Fred, got away with the money-laden mule. They made a running fight of it, and headed for here again."

Polly paused a moment, "I guess the darkness favored them, or they'd all been killed instantly. However, before Fred and his guard could reach here, they were cut off by another crew of bandits. Then Fred, the guard and the mule headed for Quithatz Canyon, figuring they could barricade themselves behind rocks and make some sort of fight, rather than be killed in open country. Just as they reached the canyon, the mule was wounded, but Fred managed to keep it moving. Then the guard was

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shot down by the bandits. Fred and the mule kept going." Polly stopped.

Nogales asked, "What happened to them?"

Polly shook her head. "We don't know. One of our Indians had passed through Ramrod Ridge the previous night and had heard shots. When he spoke of it the next morning, Father rode out and found sign leading to the canyon. And he found the guard, badly wounded. Before he died he told father what had happened. Farther up the canyon, father came on the mule, also dead. But there was no sign of Fred or the gold. And until today we had never seen Fred since."

Esteban put in, "An 'now the Señor Fred sleeps again in hees father's house. Maybe when he wake, he tells."

Nogales said, "It's certainly a riddle. Where do you suppose that gold disappeared to?" He twisted in his chair, reaching for cigarette tobacco and papers. There came a sudden shout of warning from Esteban. Nogales stiffened, then leaped to his feet. The next instant there came the crash of broken glass and the savage roar of a six-shooter.

CHAPTER IX

NIGHT THUNDER

OUTSIDE, a voice yelled, "Slope fast and sudden!" There was the sound of rapid footsteps along the flag-paved gallery, then the creaking of saddle leather.

Within the house, Nogales had felt the breeze of a bullet pass his face, even as he leaped across the room where his and Caliper's gun-belts hung on pegs driven into the wall. By the time Caliper, who had been seated nearest the table, had extinguished the flame in the oil lamp and rushed to fling open the oaken door, Nogales was at his side, pressing the six-shooter into his hand. Polly had given one startled cry and then was quiet. Ethan Vincent had dashed into an inner room for his Winchester, followed by Esteban.

Outside the night was dark. The moon wasn't up yet. Nogales made out two shadowy figures on horseback, just passing through the wide gateway in the white fence that showed up as a dim blur against the surrounding gloom.

Even as Nogales raised his gun, one of the riding figures turned in the saddle. There came a lance-like streak of orange flame and a leaden slug thudded into the door jamb near Caliper. Nogales fired once, the report blending with the explosion of Caliper's weapon. They fired twice more in quick succession, just as one of the riders reached the wooden bridge over the irrigation ditch. Hoofs thudded hollowly on the wooden planks, then the horse screamed with pain. A man cursed. A heavy body crashed down and there came the sounds of splintering wood as the bridge railing gave way.

"We got one of 'em!" Nogales exclaimed.

He and Caliper raised their guns, thumbed quick shots at the remaining rider who was still riding hard. The drumming hoofs ran on, indicating that both Nogales and Caliper had missed. Now it was impossible even to make out the shadowy figure as it fled swiftly between the twin lines of cottonwood trees. Nogales raised his six-shooter and fired one chance shot in the direction of the fast-fading sounds of the running horse. From some distance off, there floated back a sudden sharp cry, but the horse kept going.

"I might have winged the buzzard," Nogales grunted disappointedly, "though maybe I just scared him."

Vincent and Esteban appeared in the doorway at Nogales' shoulder. Each had a Winchester cocked and ready. Vincent's steel-blue eyes peered into the surrounding gloom. "No use shooting when you can't see your target," he observed disappointedly. He and Esteban lowered their guns. "Polly has sent an Indian to bring up horses."

"Might as well countermand that order," Caliper suggested. "That hombre's got too much start for us to catch him. He'll probably hole up in Ramrod Ridge, and we'd never uncover him without proof."

Nogales nodded agreement. Polly returned to the room and relighted the lamp. She mentioned that the shooting hadn't awakened her wounded brother. Vincent, Esteban and the two cowboys stepped out to the gallery and descended to the ground. Two Indians rounded the corner of the house leading saddled horses. One bore a lantern.

"You can take those horses back, boys," Vincent ordered, and added a few words in the Cahuilla tongue to compliment them on their promptness.

WITH Ethan Vincent bearing the lighted lantern, the men made their way down to the irrigation ditch. The dead carcass of a horse barricaded the bridge. The right-hand railing of the structure was shattered, where the hurtling weight of horse and rider had crashed against it. The horse's body had remained on the bridge, though its neck and head hung toward the water.

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"Damn!" Nogales growled. "I sure do hate to shoot a horse."

"Maybe it was me dropped that animal," Caliper said. "We both shot together."

"That don't help the horse none," Nogales said shortly.

"But where ees thees *caballo's* rider?" Steve wanted to know.

"I could swear one of us plugged him," Caliper insisted.

"Well," Vincent said, "if you got the rider, that'll help a lot." He stood on the bridge, holding the lantern high and shading his eyes against the light, as he scrutinized the slowly moving waters of the irrigation ditch. Abruptly, he gave a sharp exclamation. The other three saw the body at the same instant.

It was lying face down, nearly submerged in the black water, resting against the right-hand bank. There wasn't much movement there—only that made by one end of a floating bandanna that stirred with the sluggish current.

The four men left the bridge and made their way along the bank. Hauling out the lifeless body took but a few moments. Then they turned the corpse on its back. Esteban stooped down and pushed back the straggly wet hair that was plastered across the face of the dead man. Then he straightened up. "Ees Ed Curry," he said quietly. "I'm theenk theese no great loss to anyone."

"Who is Ed Curry?" Nogales wanted to know.

Vincent said wearily, "Just another of that gang that hangs around Ramrod Ridge. One of Simon Crawford's crew, of course, though Crawford always claims he hasn't any crew—that he just stays in Ramrod Ridge to run his general store and bar."

"This Curry an enemy of yours?" Caliper asked.

"No more than any of Crawford's men," Vincent replied. "I've never had any trouble with him, if that's what you mean."

"They weren't after Mr. Vincent," Nogales pointed out. "It was me that slug was aimed at."

"Well, let's go back to the house," Vincent suggested. "I'll give orders to have this horse buried and Curry's body taken care of, then post a guard for the rest of the night."

THEY returned to the house. While Vincent was giving orders to his men, the others rejoined Polly in the main room. Within a short time Vincent reentered and sank wearily into a chair, saying, "I'm glad that shooting didn't awaken Fred."

Polly nodded. "All the same, I'll feel better when Doctor Stebbings arrives."

Nogales said, "I wonder who came here with Ed Curry."

Vincent shrugged, "One of the Crawford gang, of course, though we can't prove that, any more than we can prove it was Crawford's men that ambushed Fred when he was carrying that gold. If we could only get something on Crawford—" He broke off, "That's why we sent Esteban to Paraiso to see his brother. His brother once said he'd heard Crawford was wanted for a killing, up in Utah. We thought maybe we could interest the law in the case, if we could get details. But, as you know, while Esteban waited for his brother, you showed up in Paraiso. I've a feeling Esteban thought you might help us."

"We'll do all possible," Nogales said. "Did the San Diego bank ever send detectives here to look into the situation?"

Vincent shook his head. "That wasn't necessary," he said bitterly. "You see, the bank suspected Fred of having a hand in the gold's disappearance, when he vanished. So I raised a loan on the Rancho de Paz—"

"On what?" Caliper asked.

"Our place here. We call it the Rancho de Paz. Anyway, I made good the bank's loss. After that the bank lost all interest in the robbery. Worst of all, I was forced to borrow the money from Simon Crawford—" He broke off. "However, you're not interested in my financial difficulties."

"Maybe we are," Nogales protested. He made a shrewd guess: "And now, if I'm not mistaken, you're broke and Crawford is pressing you for the money. Well, maybe I can fix that up."

Vincent shook his head, his lips tightly compressed. Then he spoke, "In the first place, Crawford isn't pressing me for the money. In fact, he doesn't want the money. It's the Rancho de Paz he's after. Crawford is just waiting until the time is up in which I'm to repay the loan, then he'll drop down and take the property. The day will come when this place will be worth many times the amount I borrowed on it. No, wait"—to Nogales—"I know what you're driving at. I appreciate it. But it is one thing to accept money from you to save Fred's life; it's quite another to accept help in saving this place. You've done enough. My only hope is to uncover that missing gold."

"All right," Nogales nodded. "I won't say another word. But howcome you didn't go to a bank for your loan? Why put yourself in Crawford's clutches?"

"The banks wouldn't lend," Vincent said bitterly. "After the suspicions against Fred, the banks were afraid to have anything to do with us. The very fact I borrowed from Crawford should prove how desperate I was."

"I reckon," Nogales growled. He sat staring at the floor. "I guess, Caliper," he said, after a time, "we'll have to drop in on Crawford and have a talk with him. We'll take Curry's body in, in the morning and at the same time deliver that horse we borrowed to bring Fred here."

"You'd better keep free of my affairs," Vincent advised.

Nogales laughed shortly. "I figure it's my affair, when Crawford's jackals start shooting at me through your window." He yawned and stretched. "It's been a long day."

"It has that," Vincent agreed. "If you and Caliper are ready to hit the hay, I'll show you your room. And you'd better think twice about riding in to see Crawford tomorrow morning. He's dangerous."

"So's Caliper," Nogales grinned, "and I'll have him with me. I'm a peace-lovin' soul myself, but Caliper can sure look out for my welfare."

Caliper snorted, "Peace-lovin' soul my eye! If you're a man of peace, I'm a Sunday School hymn singer."

Steve put in, "Me, I'm love the peace, but I'm theenk I'm go along to visit theese Crawford."

Nogales chuckled. "Maybe Simon Crawford's got a surprise comin' one of these days."

They said goodnight to Polly and followed Vincent from the room. In their bedroom a few minutes later, they glanced out and saw Steve making his way down to one of the bunkhouses where the help stayed. The Mexican was softly singing a song of Old Spain as he strode along.

"Humph!" Caliper grunted. "If he can fight as well

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as he sings, we've got Crawford licked already."

"Easier said than done, m'boy," Nogales yawned. "I got a hunch we might have a tough day ahead tomorrow."

CHAPTER X

THE GUESTS WEAR GUNS

THE following morning Simon Crawford was sitting as usual in his big arm-chair in the center of the floor of his combination general store and bar. There was a table at his right hand. At the table, with a bottle and glasses before them, sat Deacon Trumbull, Hedge Furlow, Limpy Bristol and Ten-spot Nance. Crawford was doing the talking.

Ten-spot Nance eventually managed to get in a few words. "All right, boss," he said humbly, "I'll admit you're right, but that damned Nogales Scott made me so mad that—and besides, I was trying to show you I wasn't yellow."

Heavy, scornful laughter rumbled from Crawford. "Nothing you could do," he said flatly, "would convince me you wa'n't yellow. If you wanted to show off, why'n't you go it alone? No! You had to take Ed Curry with you! And where's Ed? Dead, probably. And if he ain't dead, maybe he'll get to talkin' too much. And then where'd we be?"

"You needn't worry about that," Nance put in eagerly.

Hedge Furlow said, "Any way you look at it, it was a dumb play to make, Ten-spot. If you'd told us first what you intended, I could have warned you, you and Ed could never get away with it. I know Scott and Maxwell. They're tough hombres."

Limpy Bristol said uneasily, "All this talk ain't doing us any good, boss. Supposin' Ed Curry wasn't killed? Suppose he's done some talking? Suppose Scott and Maxwell come here? What you going to say to 'em?"

"I'll tell 'em the truth, of course," Crawford said heavily. "I'll tell 'em I didn't have anything to do with Curry and Ten-spot shootin' at 'em through the window last night. From that point, it's up to them."

The Deacon asked cautiously, "You ain't afraid of that pair, are you, Simon?"

Crawford glowered at the questioner. "Afraid of 'em? Hell, no! But we got other plans, Deacon, as you know."

"You mean," the Deacon asked eagerly, "that you're figuring to get rid of Scott and then forge his name to a will, so we can get his money?"

"Not so fast, not so fast," Crawford grumbled. "It's all very well to talk of forging his name, but how we going to do it?"

"I can forge any man's handwriting," the Deacon boasted.

Crawford's big head nodded heavy assent. "I don't doubt that, but you've got to know what Scott's handwriting is like first. What you going to do—ask him for a sample of his handwriting?"

"Getting a specimen of his handwriting should be easy," the Deacon said.

"Yeah, if we were friendly with him," Crawford nodded, "but we ain't friendly. I aimed to sort of shine up to him and Maxwell and now"—he burst into another profane tirade at Ten-spot Nance—"now this dumb son and Ed Curry has ruined things. Damn you, Nance!"

"The harm's done now, Simon," the Deacon said.

CRAWFORD didn't reply, just sat back in his chair and glared at Nance who shrank back as far as possible. The Deacon lifted the heavy brown whiskey bottle and filled the glasses. The last glass—Nance's—emptied the bottle, and the Deacon set it back on the table, saying, as he lifted his own glass: "Well, here's how!"

The others reached for their glasses, all except Crawford who was glaring at Nance. Then Crawford laughed shortly. The sound was ugly. Reaching for the empty whiskey bottle, he said, "Nance, you're a fool. Here's what I'd like to do to your neck."

Holding the heavy brown bottle between his two ham-like hands, Crawford exerted pressure. There came a sharp cracking sound as the bottle splintered in his powerful grasp. Blood trickled down from a small cut on Crawford's hand. With a heavy growl, he tossed the fragments of glass toward the bar and then reached for his drink. He gulped noisily. Ten-spot Nance was white, huddled back in his chair, eyes wide with terror as he tried to meet Crawford's gaze.

Crawford called to his bartender to bring them a second bottle of whiskey. Drinks were again poured. For a time the men sat in silence. Bright morning sunlight made a warm patch on the floor near the doorway. Flies buzzed about the bar and zoomed through the dust motes floating about the room. The Deacon tore off a goodly-sized chunk of tobacco and chewed loudly for a few moments.

HOOFBEATS sounded outside of town, came nearer. A man entered the open doorway and spoke to Crawford: "Three riders coming, boss. They're leading a fourth horse."

"Who are they?" Crawford demanded.

"Can't tell for certain, but they look like them hombres that stopped here yesterday. Y'know—Scott and Maxwell and that Mex, Jiminez."

Crawford nodded shortly. The man returned to the porch. The Deacon said, "They're leading a fourth horse, eh? I'm betting they got Ed Curry's body."

"It'll be a break for Ten-spot if it's true," Crawford growled. He turned to Limpy Bristol, "Limpy, I don't know just how the situation will shape up, but I'm depending on you to see that Ten-spot don't lose his nerve and talk too much."

Bristol said uneasily, "How can I keep Ten-spot from losing his nerve?"

"I don't expect that," Crawford said coldly, "but you can keep him from talking too much. That's why I pay you to wear a gun."

Nance gulped. He didn't say anything, as he eyed Bristol with a nervous glance. The hoofbeats outside were louder now. Suddenly silence fell.

Crawford craned his thick neck toward the doorway, but he couldn't see anything of the riders, who apparently had stopped. A frown creased his forehead. By this time there should have been some words from the man he had stationed on the porch. What was going on out there? The others, too, were straining their ears for the slightest sound. Then there came the scraping of a booted foot on the porch.

The next instant, the man Crawford had stationed on the porch backed into the room, his hands raised high in the air. Following him were Nogales, Caliper and Steve, their forty-fives drawn.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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Tiger in Black

By Edwin Truett

Along the Border they knew this Mexican for a killer, a man who would do anything for a price. But to McAllen he was something even more terrible—a Nemesis who cast a black shadow of evil wherever he went. And there was no escaping that shadow—except by the knife

CHAPTER I

MALA SUERTE

THEY call our town the Gateway to Mexico, maybe because we have, roughly, some forty thousand citizens of Mexican vintage. Go into the West End, the Mexican section, and the harshness that is English gradually fades away to be replaced by the soft sibilance that came from Spain with the *conquistadores*. Eventually, once you are deep enough in, even the advertisements, the signs, are all in Spanish and all the restaurants serve only Mexican food. Cross Santa Rosa Street and head west, bearing to the south, and it is exactly the same as if you had crossed the International Bridge at Laredo, and entered Mexico.

Consequently, whenever any of the company officials visit our town from the North or East, the odds are six, two and even they will express a desire to visit the West End. Me, Rickey, I always get the job of taking them around; after all, I'm troubleshooter, so to speak, for the company. And besides, I know my West End.

It was Ogden, from Omaha, that night. Around eleven we went into the Plaza Bar, far south on Dolorosa Street. Ogden, a nice guy, was having the time of his life. He said that never in all his career had he seen so many colorful people, heard so much colorful music or eaten so much colorful food! He said he sensed a seething undercurrent of something or other, among these people, that fascinated him. Like they were living eternally on the edge of a volcano that might erupt at any minute. I thought it was tequila in him talking, for after all he wasn't used to it, and maguey juice is pretty potent.

The Plaza is a big place, with a long bar, and a bunch of booths against the low partition that separates the barroom from the pool tables on the other side. Downstairs is the biggest *paco* game in town, which is Mexico's favorite gambling card game, in case you didn't know. Upstairs you can buy anything you have money enough to pay for—from a marihuana cigarette to a Garand rifle to smuggle into Mexico to assassinate the president.

The bar surged with Spanish; the whole place was filled with blue smoke from a hundred hand-rolled cigarettes; the click of pool balls was as rhythmic as the beat of a metronome. It was the biggest, busiest place we'd been in, and Ogden's eyes were as round and wide as those of a pleased and surprised kid. Panchito, the bar-

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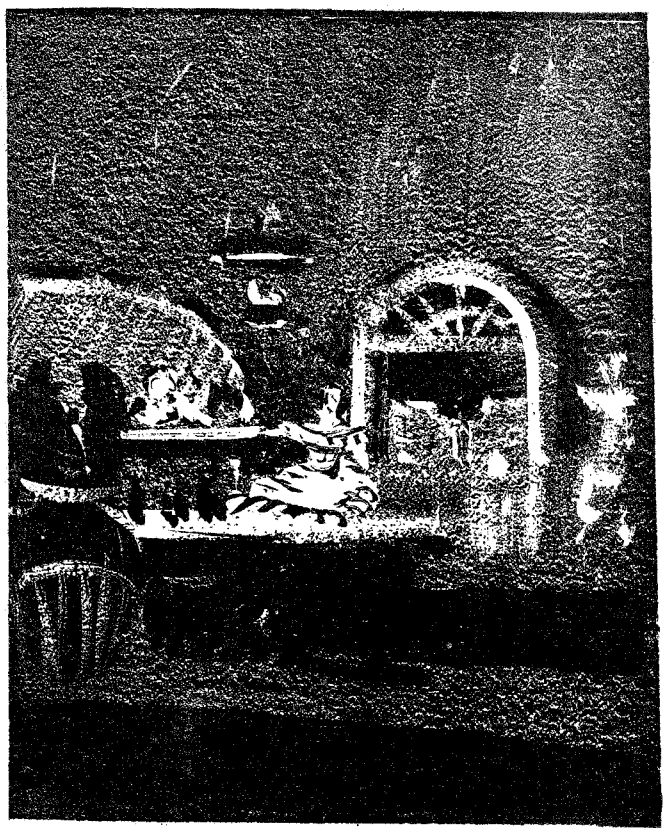

In that dim cantina they stared at each other—McAllen and the man who was his curse

man, was a friend of mine; he served tequila without protest, though, of course, it's strictly against the law in our town.

He said in Spanish, "Your friend left word that he wished to see you. He said—la! Here he comes."

IT WAS McAllen, all right, looking seedier than ever. He was carrying a spotted and greasy looking trench-coat, hanging sloppily beneath his arm so that the skirts dragged through the sawdust. His tie was askew, his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, peering out uncertainly over liver pouches as big as a man's thumb. He was about half potted, which was good, for him. We shook hands. He said, "Been wondering about Martha. She all right?"

"She's fine, McAllen," I told him. I couldn't very well tell him the truth, that Martha had quit work the week before to marry some mug from the auditing department this coming first of the month. I said, "McAllen, meet Mr. Ogden, from the Omaha branch." And, to Ogden, "Mac used to be with the company. Same job I've got—trouble-shooter. Only he was better at it. Have a drink with us, Mac?"

They shook hands and Mac said he'd be happy indeed to have a drink. His hand was a bit shaky as he upended the wet glass in the saucer of salt, to put a gritty ring about the drinking edge. I poured the tequila for him, maybe out of pity, maybe to be polite. He laid the trench-coat on the bar, grasped the half lemon in his left hand, the glass in his right.

A drunk can never take it. It's one occupation—hard drinking—wherein practice does not make perfect. But somehow Mac got the tequila into his mouth without spilling too much, tossed it down, bit blindly into the lemon with a shudder. For a minute it looked as though he might lose his stomach, but he managed to suck it back into place, and turned watering eyes on Ogden, who had watched the performance with fascination.

"Great drink, tequila, Mr. Ogden." Ogden nodded. Before he could answer McAllen continued, bitterly, "Guess you're wondering how come I'm in this condition if I used to have a four-hundred-dollar job with United National?"

"Why—why—why—" sputtered Ogden, for McAllen had hit the nail in the proper spot.

"You believe in luck? In jinxes?"

Ogden considered. He was that sort of guy. Slowly he shook his head. "No, Mr. McAllen, I can't say that I do. Luck is more or less the product of a man's own actions. It all evens up in the long run. If a man takes advantage—"

McAllen shook his head violently, waved his hand. "Take a fool's advice, Ogden, and get that idea out of your head. That may be one kind of luck, but it's not the kind I mean, it's not the dangerous, lethal kind. I'm talking about luck that's alive! Luck that's a man, or a woman, or a dog or a cat, something that lives and breathes and walks the earth. It haunts you. It's got a finger in every trouble that comes to you. You can't get away from it because it's like your shadow. It's Nem—Nem—Nemesis!"

"Sort of a hex? An evil eye? Bosh!"

"Don't bosh me, mister! I know what I'm talking about. Don't forget, luck's alive, for every man and woman. You'll run into yours some day, and when you do, scotch it like you would a snake. Don't be a coward and a weakling—like me. Step on it! Kill it—whether it's a man or a woman—like you would a mad dog. If you don't, it'll ruin you, sure as hell. It'll break you, and drive you down to my level. Panchito! *Tres mas.*"

I was pretty worried: McAllen was getting started. He always made me feel bad, the wreckage of a once fine man, but when he got to raving about luck being alive, he was worse. I began figuring on how we could get away without offending him. And suddenly, beside me, I felt Ogden stiffen, and followed the direction of his gaze into the bar mirror. Chico Menchaca was coming out of the pool room into the bar.

CHICO MENCHACA was a cat. A killer-cat, if that makes sense, and it was written all over him for everyone's reading. He was tall for a Mexican, almost six feet, I'd say off-hand. His shoulders were wide, his hips, flat and narrow. His expensive clothing was always dark, even his shirt being of black silk, usually with a small white polka dot in it. Around his throat he always wore a black silken scarf.

I think it was his eyes that gave him that killer-cat look, that and the way he moved and walked. He flowed, exactly like a feline, soundlessly, effortlessly, his muscles rippling visibly clear up to his slightly weaving shoulders. You knew instinctively that this man could be hurled from a great height and that somehow in midair he would twist to alight easily and resiliently on his feet. You knew he could roll with a blow that would stun another, and still retain his senses and the ready elasticity of his rubber muscled body.

His eyes were green. Set in the coffee colored darkness of his face, deep beside his thin-bridged nose, because of their lightness they seemed absolutely colorless. It

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gave a startling impression. His lips were thin, and straight, his chin pointed. There was something about the man that spelled danger as surely as a red flag, something about him that said, "Caution, caution! This man has killed. This man will kill again!"

And that something was right. For I will tell you this: Chico Menchaca was eternally for hire. There was nothing he would not do, for sufficient money, sufficient pay. Chico Menchaca was the most dangerous Mexican in all the country between San Antonio and the Border. Chico Menchaca was Death, and it was easy to sense this about him.

He stood there easily, swaying a bit on his feet, staring at the bar with those green cat's eyes, his lips a thin, straight line. The soft sibilance of Spanish died away. Panchito pawed at the bar with his damp cloth. A tension entered and hung there, as a sudden draft might come in through an open door.

A man with long handlebar mustaches, standing near the end of the bar turned and stared at Chico Menchaca. His face was a dirty yellow, mottled from paleness, and hate, and fear. Slowly this man turned away, tossed money on the bar and walked out the door. The cat eyes watched him go expressionlessly, the slender, muscled body continued to sway. Noiselessly, effortlessly, Menchaca crossed to the bar. Panchito sat a soft drink before him without being bidden, gave him greeting, to which he obtained no answer—only an insolent flicker of the green eyes.

Ogden looked at me surreptitiously. Quietly I said, "The most dangerous Mexican north of the Border. He killed the brother of the man who left—the man with the mustaches—only four days ago. Want anyone knifed, Ogden?"

His smile was sickly as he shook his head. I tell you, there is even an odor about death, death like Chico Menchaca. I started as someone brushed by me. It was McAllen, headed for Chico Menchaca. Then I remembered, and I was suddenly cold all over. I was frozen, there at the bar. My brain shouted for me to grab McAllen, to pull him back to safety, but my muscles would not respond. Ogden, too, sensed tragedy, for his face was white, his eyes protruding as he watched.

McALLEN had left his trenchcoat lying on the bar. Menchaca saw him coming and stiffened slightly, turning from his drink. His right hand strayed swiftly, sliding high up on his right lapel. Chico Menchaca carried a knife at the back of his neck.

McAllen said, low and hoarse, *"Vamos, Mala Suerte!* Have I not warned you?"

Chico Menchaca stared at him with those strange green eyes, his face still expressionless. He said, in Spanish, "There is enough of this, Big One. Go thy way, let me go mine."

And again McAllen said, *"Vamos, Mala Suerte!"* His great, hairy hand reached out and picked up the glass of soda. Deliberately without taking his eyes from Chico Menchaca's, he threw the soda into the spittoon.

Somehow I came to life then; somehow I managed to lay a hand on the butt of the gun beneath my arm. I did not think I could draw and fire swiftly enough to save McAllen—Menchaca was so much lightning with a knife. I did not think McAllen could save himself, being only the wreck of the man he once had been. The spark was still there, the courage and the will, but the body was only a burned-out husk, burned out from too much liquor and too much brooding.

Chico Menchaca's slim fingers were higher on his collar now; his eyes were blazing. His breath came with a faint, hissing sound. And a funny thing happened.

I do not know what Menchaca read in the eyes of the wreck of a man who faced him. Certainly he did not feel fear, for fear was alien to him. I do not know what he was thinking, what he was remembering. But slowly, slowly, his right hand came down from his lapel, an inch-fraction at a time.

I know what I was remembering, I know what I was seeing. I was seeing McAllen, the way he had been a year ago, huge and strong, off the liquor, in love with Martha Corriss, the Old Man's secretary, and Martha in love with him. I was seeing two men south of the Border, on the Hacienda del Potrero, fighting connivance and lies and treachery and evasion. Two men, fearless, though the entire countryside was against them; two men stealing through the dull dirty gray of Mexican dawn up through the stunted mesquite and the chaparral and the tangled cactus, to the very walls of a brush hut. And then it all faded away and I saw the husk of a man, burned out by liquor, facing a killer and backing him down.

For Chico Menchaca's hand now hung limply at his side. His eyes were still green flames, but he shrugged. He turned on his heel and he walked like a cat to the front door, muscles rippling up over his swaying shoulders, his swinging arms. Soundlessly he opened the door, soundlessly he faded through it. For a moment he paused in the yellow square of light, adjusting his scarf, for the fog had half turned into a blowing mist. Then he was gone.

McAllen turned. Perspiration was on his forehead; the madness was fading from his eyes. His lips were loose, and his tongue flicked out at their dryness. To no one he said desperately, "I've got to do it, I *have* to! Sooner or later!" He came back to the bar. He clattered his wet glass into the saucer of salt and Panchito poured his drink, his own hand shaking. McAllen grasped his half lemon, picked up his glass, losing half the liquor.

Huskily, shakily, he said, *"Salud!"* His voice actually trembled; the letdown had him, he was scared to death. He took the drink, shuddered, leaned over the bar as though he were about to lose it. He fumbled his topcoat over his arm, and went out, without saying a word, went out through the door that had released Chico Menchaca moments before, to fade away into the fog and mist.

Ogden was sweating as profusedly as McAllen. His eyes were sick. He muttered, "What in God's name did McAllen say to him?"

"He told him to *vamos,* to get out. And he called him —Bad Luck. 'Get out, Bad Luck.'"

Ogden quavered, "Let's go. I've got enough. I'm afraid I'll be sick."

So he went out into the fog and turned left toward where the car was parked. And we were probably thinking the same thing, Ogden and I. Wondering what in God's name it was that made a burned out has-been like McAllen face death itself and hurl his command. We were remembering McAllen's mad harangue. "Luck is alive," he'd said to Ogden, and "Step on it like a snake, kill it like a mad dog!"

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McAllen hadn't been afraid of death, afraid of Menchaca. He had an even greater fear! A greater horror! The dread that he would kill this *mala suerte*, this bad luck, this jinx, or hex, that was Chico Menchaca!

CHAPTER II

THE WAY DOWN

PARTS of McAllen's life are not pretty, for his trouble had always been liquor. There was a queer twist or quirk in that brain of his that made him go along for months, never even so much as touching a beer, then suddenly plunging off the deep end like a diver into a pool.

He'd hide himself, usually here in San Antonio's West End. He'd lock himself up and drink himself into insensibility. He haunted the lowest of cantinas, the back-room drinking places where homemade pulque and smuggled mescal were dispensed. Never a bite would he eat, all his nourishment, if such it could be called, coming from the neck of a bottle or the brim of a glass.

He'd trade his clothes for rags, to buy more liquor. Till the day would come, when weak and sick and shaken, he couldn't get out of his dirty cot, and either some of his friends would find him, or the Mexican owner would get frightened and call a policeman. McAllen would be carted away to a hospital to be fed and nourished through the veins, and washed out internally and generally restored to fair health.

Don't ask me what made him do it. You never saw a sorrier guy afterward, a more remorseful guy. He was a psychopathic case if ever I saw one. He'd come out of the hospital and swear with tears in his eyes that it was his last binge, but deep in his miserable heart I think he knew it would happen again, just as everyone else knew.

He started out as a uniformed copper in Dallas. He resigned there—by request, after a toot—but managed to talk his way onto the Rangers, a bit later. He was a Ranger for several years before the usual trouble threw him, and after he was released from the hospital and was again on his feet, some of his friends with plenty of pull got him on the Border Patrol.

He knew the Border, all right, did McAllen; no man knew it better. And for a long time he kept his nose clean. When he felt those impulses coming on he'd get leave of absence, and in that manner, he held on to his job, though he was in trouble once or twice.

He met the Old Man, who is T. D. Dobbins, president of United National, while he was with the Patrol. The Old Man liked him; he had a weakness for big men who were as tough as they looked. The Old Man propositioned him, and McAllen quit the Border Patrol and hooked on with the company.

You may wonder why the U.N. needs troubleshooters. It's because, like Lloyds, we insure anything and everything, write every kind of policy that is to be written, not only in this country but throughout Mexico and Central America. We have the usual investigators, men who are not even known to the office employees, who work constantly under cover, just as other insurance companies have.

But the troubleshooters, usually three of us, work in the open—aboveboard. We go into some strange places between here and the Canal, and we're all specially deputized. You need tact, strength, the ability to take it, a sense of diplomacy and the ability to use a gun, swiftly and well. A little knowledge of knives is also an asset. It's a strange business, I suppose, but a necessary one.

MARTHA CORRISS was the Old Man's secretary, as sweet and pretty a brunette as a man ever saw. She had what I guess you'd call strength of character, and she didn't care much for men. But she liked Mac from the start. He did good work, and the Old Man was pleased, and Martha was pleased, and he was making progress with the company, and with Martha, too.

As a matter of fact, he was in the Old Man's office when the thing began, when the Mexican, Raul Estrella, asked to see the president. McAllen heard, of course. He said, "Mmmmmm. Raul Estrella, eh? What do you suppose he wants, Mr. Dobbins?"

The Old Man shrugged. "You know him?"

"Sure. Got a lot of land, two or three haciendas, down in Neuvo Leon. Comes to San Antonio every couple of months in his imported car and cuts a wide swath. Likes to gamble, doesn't drink too much, and enjoys his big splurge. Mister Big I. Wonder what he wants here?"

There was only one way to find out, so Martha showed him into the office. I never saw the man myself; Martha described him for me. He was about medium in height, his color was very light, almost creamy, and he had a tiny black waxed mustache. Though he was inclined to be a bit on the paunchy side, said Martha, he was handsome enough, a real Latin lady's man. He dressed expensively and wore a tiger's head ring on his left hand, the tiger holding an immense emerald in its mouth.

To make a long story short, Raul Estrella wanted life insurance. Not a small policy, not Raul Estrella! He inquired about premiums on a $250,000 double indemnity policy. Without batting an eye, as if such policies were an everyday occurrence, the Old Man gave him the cost. Then he leaned back and built a church steeple with his fingers, and said, gruffly: "Of course, Mr. Estrella, I must warn you that besides a doctor's examination, other investigation will be necessary before United can issue such a policy to a citizen of a foreign country."

Estrella waved his hand and the great emerald gleamed. "Señor McAllen knows of me," he smiled. "We have, in Neuvo Leon, three haciendas. The smallest of these, as Señor McAllen is aware, is the Hacienda del Potrero, which is some 300,000 *hectares*. With you, I shall leave my local bank references, my bank references from Mexico, and you may investigate to your heart's content. The premium shall be paid in cash, naturally. I expect to be at the St. Anthony for the next three days. If I may take my physical examination during that time I shall be grateful."

When he left, McAllen said, "He's right about the money, Mr. Dobbins. I guess the Estrellas have got a *peso* for every *garbanza* in Mexico."

So, the upshot of the matter was that the Old Man did a bit of wiring, then went over to the St. Anthony and wrote the application himself. A specialist went over Raul Estrella, and found but one thing wrong with him. That was a bit odd, especially for a Mexican, for he had bad teeth, and most of our little brothers from south of the Border have phenomenally good ones. Almost every tooth in Estrello's head needed something done to it.

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However, Estrella stayed over, not three days but closer to three weeks, going to Doc Steele daily for dental work, and at last he was given the final okay. He paid six months premiums in cash, right up on the barrelhead, and even at his age, which was only twenty-nine, those premiums weren't lettuce!

NOTHING happened for the next three months. The fourth month, McAllen skidded. He told me afterward it started with a bottle of beer. He was in a café eating *tacos* and *refritos* when a beer salesman came in. You know how those guys are, how they set up a bottle of beer for everyone in the house? That one beer started McAllen off. Fifteen days later I found him, sick as a dog, wearing a blue work shirt and a pair of dirty overalls. He'd sold his shoes, too, and was wearing Mexican *huaraches,* with soles cut from an old automobile tire.

The hell of it was that Martha was with me. She'd insisted on going, every night after work, since he'd disappeared. He was too dirty and sick even to notice her. We got him to a hospital and left him cleaned up in a bed, shaking and shivering, and just beginning to see the little pink turkeys with the straw hats.

I could tell, in the car, by the set of her jaw, that she was pretty disgusted. "Be truthful, Rickey," she said. "How many years has it been going on like this?"

You don't lie to women like Martha, not even to cover up a friend you like. I had to tell her the truth. Her eyes got frostier than ever, her chin more grimly set. But Martha had a lot of charity in her heart. Two days later—as soon as McAllen got a little more normal—she saw him. I was along.

Standing there beside the bed she stared down at him for at least three minutes without saying a word. There's nothing or nobody quite so repentant as a dyed-in-the-wool inebriate just getting over a toot. McAllen's eyes filled with tears, he turned his face to the wall and gulped. Martha leaned down and slapped him on the shoulder.

"You big baby!" She tried to make her voice sound tough and hard, but it was only husky and shaky. "Snap out of it! I've saved your job by talking my head off to the Old Man. You're going to get another chance, but you're strictly on probation, do you hear? One more slip and you're all through. Do you think you can be a man?"

He gulped noisily, and said, without turning his head, "And what about you?"

Her gulp was just as noisy. "Same thing," she managed. "Probation, Mac. As long as you behave, you and I are like we were. One slip—curtains."

He fumbled for her hand and I turned away, quick. I can't explain it. You can't help liking McAllen, in spite of his weakness. There's something about the guy that you can't just lay your finger on and say, "This is it," but it's there just the same.

In the car she asked me a question. "Rickey," she said, "how about one of those liquor cures for him? Would it work?"

I shook my head. "Legitimate cures won't even take periodic drinkers like McAllen," I told her. "They can help a fellow that drinks steadily, Martha, but you can't do much for a fellow that just goes off the deep end every five or six months. I'm afraid Mac's a problem for a psychiatrist."

Almost grimly she said, "I think I'm psychiatrist enough for Mac!"

He came back, a little sick and shaky, but still big and tough looking. He kept his chin up and took his hell from the Old Man, and he swore faithfully and solemnly that he'd touched his last drop. The Old Man is not a mincer of words. He poured it on, hot and heavy, and McAllen assured him that he realized he had it coming.

There was a noticeable coolness in the way Martha treated him, too. And it was sort of pathetic, the way he took it. Like a dog that's had a good beating and realizes he deserved all that he got.

CHAPTER III

THE DEVIL HAS HIS PRICE

HE'D been back three days when the letter came from Rodriguez, Neuvo Leon. The clerk that opened it, rushed right to the Old Man with it. It was from Señora Dolores Estrella, the wife of Raul. It said, in effect, "Gentlemen: My husband, Raul José Maria Estrella, was shot to death on the fourth of this month, buried on the sixth. I am enclosing attested proof of death according to American law, signed and sealed by Juez Jorge Cadena."

The *juez,* or judge, in case you speak no Spanish, was one of those flowery old boys, going into plenty of detail very colorfully. I told you Estrella was a lady's man. Well, sir, it seems he made a mistake of selection; he played around with the wrong married woman and her husband practically blew his head off with a shotgun. The judge leaned over backward to be utterly legal and complete in his information. He said that Estrella's entire face had been blown away, yet he had been positively identified by his own wife, his widowed mother, and that the woman with whom he had been playing around also admitted it was Raul Estrella. There was a coroner's statement and a burial certificate. The papers were in order, all right.

The Old Man sent for McAllen, and I was in his office, too. He tossed McAllen the papers and the letter, and after he had gotten well into them, said dryly, "You know what that means, don't you, McAllen?"

McAllen looked up, nodded. "A half million bucks, sir. Double indemnity." He turned back to the papers.

"It stinks," snapped the Old Man. "It could be done too easily. Plenty of low-class Mexican women would swear their lovers were Adolph Hitler for fifty *pesos!* It's too pat. Read it all over, McAllen. You'll have two days to pry around town, to check everything here you can check. After that—the Hacienda del Potrero."

McAllen looked up again, his brow corrugated. "You'll never get an exhumation order, sir."

The Old Man snapped, "You're a troubleshooter, aren't you? You're going to find out—and I'm leaving the *how* to you—whether Raul Estrella really got his face blown off with a shotgun or not. That's all."

He stopped by Martha's desk and told her all about it, the worried frown still crisscrossing his brow. She said, "Well, what are you all worked up about? You'll swing it, one way or the other. Don't you see, Mac, this is a heaven-sent opportunity. This is your chance to make up for the past, for the sewer water that trickled under the bridge and still smells bad. This is your chance to make it all up to the Old Man!"

And again he said, "And how about you?"

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Suddenly, there in the moonlight, Menchaca's knife blade gleamed

She was a right pretty girl, anyway. When she flushed, she was prettier. She nodded, and her eyes were shiny. "Me, too, you darned fool," she said, sort of huskily.

McALLEN did a good job in San Antonio during his two days' grace period. He was well known, he knew all the gamblers as well as the club operators, and all of them liked him. And the things he turned up made the Estrella affair—to borrow a word from the Old Man—stink worse than ever.

Raul Estrella had been gambling high, wide and handsome for the past year, right here in our town. And the boys had taken him over the humps plenty. To be exact, as well as McAllen could check, his losses amounted to something like $180,000. Even if you own three haciendas in Mexico, each of them running around a million acres, you can't toss $180,000 away in a year's time without feeling it. Plenty.

There were other things, too. Little things. As soon as he'd paid our premium in cash, he'd withdrawn a lot of jack from the local banks. So much that Doc Steele's four-hundred-dollar check for dental work, bounced like a golf ball. And the St. Anthony Hotel was holding another elastic draft for almost the same amount. It looked like our potbellied little friend, Raul José Maria Estrella, was about to run out of money just before he died. If.

That night I met Chico Menchaca for the first time. McAllen took me to the Plaza for that purpose. On the way he explained the why of the thing. He said, "Rickey, I know Mexico. I know what the Hacienda del Potrero will be like, I know what all haciendas are like. They're little kingdoms, little worlds. Even the town belongs to the family—everything! Does that mean anything to you?"

I said, "I heard you tell the Old Man it would be impossible to get an exhumation order from the courts. Is that what you mean?"

"That's it. If this is on the level, and Estrella was really killed, the chances are that the family is deeply religious and won't let the grave be opened. And if it's all a half-million-buck frameup, as it appears to be, they'll have this judge fixed to he'll refuse to grant the order. See?"

I nodded. "What are we going here for?"

"The Old Man said he wanted that corpse identified, didn't he?"

"That's what he said."

"I'm going to identify it. I've got good impressions of all that toothwork, got them from Doc Steele. I'm going to look into that grave, with an order or without one." He had his jaw set and there was a funny gleam in his eye. I wondered if maybe the grave wouldn't be guarded, if the thing were faked, guarded to prevent just such an illegal opening. I mentioned it.

"That's what we're down here for. I'm going to fix it to take the damnedest *Mexicano* in the world with me. This hombre would spit in the devil's face and twist his tail. If anybody can open that grave, this man can. You see, Rickey, I can't depend on hiring anyone down there. Everyone works on the hacienda. They'll all have their instructions, crooked work or not."

He pulled the car up in front of the Plaza, and sat there so long that I asked him what was the matter.

He sighed. "This hombre is necessary to me," he admitted, "and yet I'm scared to get him, scared even to talk to him. For the last ten years he's been Old Man

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Jinx to me. Everytime I'm with him, everytime I see him, something happens to me."

Having no idea what he was talking about I kept quiet.

"Back in prohibition days," he went on, worried, "I was a glory hunter on the force in Dallas. I got a tipoff about a joint on my beat and kicked the door in—by myself. It was a beer flat, all right, and everybody left through the kitchen door while I was kicking the front door in. Everybody but this hombre we're going to meet."

After a while, I said, "And what happened?"

"The son-of-a-gun was sitting at a table with two quarts of brew. He looked at me through a pair of green eyes, and grinned, and said, 'The others seem to have had engagements elsewhere. Have a drink, officer?' "

Afterwhile, again, I said, "So what?"

"He was so damned cool and collected I drank a bottle of home brew with him. Then I went on a three weeks' bat."

AND it was sort of uncanny the way he told it. He liked this Chico Menchaca, liked him for his toughness, his dangerousness, his frank lack of morals, any morals whatsoever. But so help me, the man *was* a jinx to him, whether you believe in such things or not. After he lost his job in Dallas he'd run into Chico in San Antonio. They had been sitting quietly at a table in a café when a man opened the front door and fired a six-shooter at Menchaca. Six times. Menchaca wasn't touched. McAllen caught four of the six slugs in the back and spent nine months in the hospital.

One night, later on, after he'd become a Ranger, he'd been riding back from Neuvo Laredo when he had a flat, on the highway. He had a jack but no jack handle. The first passerby, whom, of course he flagged down, was a produce truck. Who was aboard but Chico Menchaca, and what was beneath the heaped up load of turnips but twenty cases of smuggled *berreteaga*.

"Don't ask me why," said McAllen hoarsely, "but I opened a bottle and was off again. And that cost me a job." He went on from there, a bit at a time. And so help me, it did seem this Menchaca was mixed up somewhere in all the trouble he'd ever been in! Even the last time, he admitted, he'd been eating with Menchaca when the beer salesman came in.

"Doesn't he know your—your trouble?" I asked. "Doesn't he ever try to stop you from getting started?"

McAllen looked disgusted and spat out the car window. He rolled it back up, growled, "You don't know this hombre. Come on, let's look him up. Jinx or no jinx, I need him. I've got to pull this one out of the fire for the Old Man and Martha." And together we walked into the Plaza Bar.

I remember he was sitting at a table in the rear of the place, not far from the juke box. He had a weakness for the heartbroken lyrics of *Perfidia,* though I learned afterward that he was utterly tone deaf. He had placed a dollar's worth of nickels in the juke box and had the *Perfidia* button stuck down with a whittled match. All the time we were there the record played over and over again, but no one so much as glared in our direction. Everyone knew who was playing that juke box.

McAllen kicked back a chair and dropped into it, scowling. His jaw muscles were like white walnuts beneath the tan of his taut skin, and his eyes beneath their bushy brows were narrowed and grim.

Chico Menchaca never smiled. He simply pulled his thin lips back from his white teeth in a grimace of greeting, *"Buenos noches, Borracho,"* he said. "Good evening, Drunkard."

McAllen flushed, but he answered evenly enough. *"Buenos noches, Mala Suerte.* 'Good evening, Bad Luck.' "

They started bleakly at one another for a long moment. The impression I gained was this: here were two strong men who respected each other, yet each of whom aroused the other's antagonism. Two strong men who might meet and talk and even banter and joke, and yet each of them was aware that sometime, sooner or later, they would meet, not as friends, but as deadly enemies.

"MALA SUERTE?" jeered Menchaca. "If I am your Bad Luck, your jinx, why do you come to me? Are you not afraid, *Borracho?"*

McAllen's grin wasn't so nice. "If ever I find myself afraid of a man," he said softly, "I will kill him if I have to shoot him in the back. I am not one to live in fear, Chico. That much you know."

The long womanlike lashes on the green eyes flickered; the grimace came and departed. "A drink, my brave *amigo?"* Again that jeering note was in the soft voice.

McAllen answered, "This is my friend, John Rickey."

The green eyes were turned on me. He stared coldly before nodding. I told you before, earlier in this thing, that you could smell death and I smelled it then. I have nerve, I do not scare easily, but as I sat there with those green eyes staring into mine the perspiration broke out in the palms of my hands and I knew here was a man to fear.

McAllen said, "I go to Mexico tomorrow, *amigo.* I need help. Are your papers in order?"

"My papers are always in order," answered Menchaca. "And to help you, *amigo,* it will pay me how much?"

He did not ask what the job was. It might be an assassination, or the destruction of a dam, or a bit of mass murder. Chico Menchaca did not care. He was only interested in the price.

"Five hundred—and expenses."

Maybe I started, for I knew the Old Man would never stand it. He hired troubleshooters to shoot trouble and expected them to do their work without outside assistance. And then I remembered that McAllen was looking on this as his big opportunity, his big chance to convince the Old Man and Martha that he amounted to something. Somewhere, somehow, he'd borrowed that money and was willing to spend it for the help he knew he'd need.

Chico considered. "And how long will this job require, *amigo?"*

"Two or three days. Four at the most."

"I will be ready at noon, *amigo,"* said Chico, and waved his hand insolently to signify the interview was over. When McAllen did not move he turned impatiently to the juke box.

"There is only this," said McAllen dryly. "I am absolutely the boss, you the *segundo,* Chico. This time I take no chances on that *mala suerte* of yours."

"As you will, *Borracho,* as you will!"

So McAllen and I arose and went out into the street and got into the car. We sat silent for a moment, and the strains of *Perfidia* floated out through the open doorway and filled our sedan.

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McAllen grinned wryly. "I'm a little scared of this, scared something will happen as it always does," he admitted. "But tell me, did you ever see a tougher *Mexicano* in your life?"

I shook my head, said, "I'm glad it's your job instead of mine, McAllen." And I meant it.

CHAPTER IV

IT'S CLEVER TO DIE

AT THAT I kissed in on it, as far as the Border, at least. I'd been correct about the five hundred for Menchaca; it was McAllen's personal money. He didn't even tell the Old Man or Martha that the Mexican killer-cat was going along. The town of Rodriguez, just a wide place in the road, and not much of a road at that, was some forty-three or forty-four miles southwest of Laredo, Texas.

The Hacienda del Potrero lay directly west of the town, a few miles farther on. I was not to cross the Border, but was to wait in Laredo, in case McAllen needed detail work done or any assistance. To be truthful, I think it was at Martha's suggestion that I was included, sort of to keep an eye on Mac.

Chico Menchaca sat in the back seat of the sedan and said not a word from San Antonio to Laredo. The rear could have been empty for all of him. Nor was McAllen much more voluble. At Laredo I checked in at the hotel, Mac taking the wheel and Menchaca moving up in front.

Mac said, "You'll hear from me shortly, Rickey. This won't take long. You feel all right, *Mala Suerte?*"

Menchaca made his little grimace in lieu of a smile. He didn't raise a hand in farewell as they pulled away. They were about to the corner when the right rear tire blew out with a blast like a shotgun. When I got there they'd pulled over to the curb and McAllen was glaring vindictively at Menchaca. "Already it starts," he said grimly, and opening the door, started for the filling station.

The road from Neuvo Laredo to Rodriguez is bad enough in dry weather. It had rained the day before and the road was a mass of mud. They bogged down three times before reaching Jarita and slid into the drainage ditch twice between there and the deserted town of Camaron.

The new town, a bit farther on, is Anahuac and consists of a couple of stores, a railroad station, a pair of cantinas and a group of adobe shacks. The Rio Salado, instead of being the usual mere trickle of water, imprisoned far upstream by the dam at Don Martin, was a raging torrent, some three or four inches over the flooring of the bridge.

McAllen took one look and snarled, "Listen, *Mala Suerte,* there may be a bunch of planks washed out of this bridge. If you ride across with me we'll end up in the river. Out, Bad Luck, out! You're walking over."

And Menchaca walked. Which might or might not have broken McAllen's bad luck, for the car passed over the bridge safely and a few moments later was in the little Mexican town of Rodriguez. I've been there, and it's typical. There may be three hundred population, though I doubt it, since the Mexican government built Anahuac. Menchaca, keeping in the background, slid into a cantina for a soft drink while McAllen looked up the *presidente.*

To his great surprise, *El Presidente* was none other than our old friend, Juez Jorge Cadena, who had attested the papers mailed to the United National concerning Estrella's death. Cadena owned the general store, but as soon as he learned who McAllen was, he closed up quickly, and they departed for the Cantina of the Beautiful Flowers Where All Is Fragrant and Soft Music Plays.

MENCHACA was there. He never looked up. Cadena drank *habenero,* McAllen a Coca Cola. "*Señor,*" said Cadena, shuddering, "it was a terribleness of which I do not like to speak! Raul was—shall we say a bit wild, as men often are."

He raised his white brows and stared comprehensively at McAllen, who nodded.

"Who am I, a poor man, to speak of the respected widow of Raul Estrella, but *señor,* as one man to another, the *señora* has grown short tempered and shrewish of late years. Raul Estrella, *señor,* must not have of the blame too much! He was a man, and you know how we men are." He sighed. "Cuca Gonzales is a beautiful woman, very beautiful."

He accepted another drink graciously.

"What happened, *señor juez?*"

"In the letter I spoke of it, *señor.*"

"But you see, *señor presidente,* many *pesos* are involved, well over two million, in fact. My company desires that I have first-hand information."

"Did you say *two* millions, *señor?* I understood from the *señora* that it was slightly over one million." He shrugged. "But what means such money to one as miserably poor as I, Jorge Cadena?"

"Perhaps, *señor juez,*" said McAllen softly, "when you tell me all I wish to know you will not be so poor." The judge brightened visibly.

"From the *peons,*" he said softly, "I have learned that for many months at the Hacienda del Potrero Raul Estrella has been making love to Cuca Gonzales. This is the business of danger, for Pablo Gonzales, the husband, has a badness and a great blackness of jealousy in his heart. Raul would give him work that took him to one of the other haciendas overnight, and—ah, well, you know how a man is."

"And on the night of the fourth, he came home?"

"He did not go to his work at all, this false Pablo Gonzales! He, too, heard the loose talk, and he hid in the thicket behind his house and waited. Soon his wait was rewarded, for poor Raul, God rest him, came to the house. It was only after he had emerged that Pablo Gonzales shot him with both barrels of a shotgun."

"How do you know these things, *señor?*"

"From Pablo Gonzales, who is now in the *juzgado* at the hacienda, *señor.* Although I believe that soon he will be freed, for no man has the privilege of being caught making love to another's wife in even a free and noble country such as ours."

"And you saw Raul dead yourself, *señor juez?*"

The old man nodded. "I understand, *señor.* You may rest with assurance, it was Raul Estrella whose face was devastated by the shotgun. There was his clothing, there was his family ring. His mother say it was her son. His wife stare grimly at him and admit it is Raul. Pablo Gonzales say it is Raul, and the wife, Cuca, admit the same." He took his drink. "Surely the wife, Cuca, would know, *señor,* who visited her. No?"

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The Mexican drew out that fragile negligee

"I am but doing my job, *señor.*" McAllen shrugged. "This is my work, and for well over two million *pesos,* it must be done."

"Two millions," grumbled the judge. "I thought it was but one, and a bit more. But no matter. What else, *señor?*"

"There was a *medico* who signed a paper?"

"*Si,* indeed. He is of this village, *señor.* You wish to see him?"

THE doctor's name doesn't matter. McAllen said he was little and thin, and shaken with constant fever, that he had a beard like a goat.

"Of a certainty, *señor,* it was Raul Estrella. Three days before he came into my poor house with an infected cut on his left hand. I dressed it, *señor,* I, myself. And the dressing was still on the hand of the corpse." He leered at McAllen. "And should that woman of fire, Cuca Gonzales, not know with whom she played her husband false?"

"*Señor medico,* you removed the dressing from the dead man's hand?"

"*Porque?* Why? Should a dead man's wound be dressed, *Americano?*"

And that was that. McAllen paid off the judge, slipped the shivering *medico* a few *pesos* and hurried back to the cantina and Menchaca, who awaited his coming patiently. "Tonight," he told his Bad Luck, "we stay at a *posada,* a rooming house, and tomorrow morning we start for the hacienda. You heard the conversation of John Rickey and myself on the way to Laredo?"

"Enough," nodded Menchaca. "I know why we are here, Big One."

So they hunted their *posada* and afterward returned to the same cantina for their evening meal. Three *muchachos* were on hand, with a pair of guitars and a mandolin, and Chico Menchaca had them singing *Perfidia* until McAllen put an end to it.

Menchaca said, "Note the man in white at the bar, Big One. He has been here but a few moments. He watches us. Word has been sent to the hacienda that you are here and this is the answer. I talk—with the owner."

The result of the amazing talk added even more to the suspicious character of the whole setup. For the Mexican government, it seems, was expropriating most of the Hacienda del Potrero to remake into *ejidos. Ejidos* are sort of communal farming villages where the *peon* works his own land with government machinery and lives on government credit until his crops come in.

McAllen thought exultantly: So! Raul Estrella loses $180,000 American money gambling. His *ranchos* are not doing so well. And now the government steps in to take part of his land.

Back to the *posado* they went, for they were tired, and just as Menchaca had said, the *peon* in white followed them, a pale blurb of grayness in the shadows not too far behind.

Once in their room Menchaca swore. "That dog of an owner! Your bag has been moved, Big One! No doubt it has been searched! I will get that proprietor and—"

"Nuts! Go to sleep, Chico. There was nothing in my bag. It is here." He tapped his money belt, where he was carrying the teeth impressions obtained from Doc Steele, on which he was so dependent.

CHAPTER V

WOMAN OF FIRE

EARLY morning found them fighting the wet sandy ruts that led westward to the Hacienda del Potrero. The country was wild, a tangle of cactus and mesquite and the thousand and one other horned and spined plants so prevalent in northern Mexico's sand and rock country. While the hacienda was but six miles distance from Rodriguez, the drive required the better part of an hour. But presently they topped a small rise and looked down upon their destination.

Once the Hacienda del Potrero had been a show place,

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perhaps back during the days when Porfirio Diaz and his clique were in the saddle. Now it was gone badly to seed. Some of the tiles had fallen from the roof of the hacienda proper; all of the structures were ramshackle, in need of repairs. The big house, of course, was surrounded by a high wall, and was built in a square with a patio in its center.

Directly behind it was an unkempt row of adobe houses with thatched roofs, while some dozen others were scattered on the rising rocky ground behind them. To the west was a handful of slightly larger buildings, one of which was recognizable as the store, and to the south was an ancient pole corral holding three fleabitten horses and a ragged mule. A huge, whitewashed barn tottered just beyond the corral.

A moment later and they were in the store, talking to a one-eyed man whom the others called Tuerto, and who proved to be *jefe* or head man of the hacienda. After some disgruntled protest, eventually cured by a glass of pulque, he conducted them to the house.

Raul Estrella's mother, typical of the old Mexico of years past, was puttering about her flowers in the patio. She greeted McAllen politely enough, and listened closely while he explained his business.

Mildly she said, *"Si, señor,* I understand, it is your job, it is your work. You shall talk to the widow of my poor son. For I assure you the dead man was Raul, my only man child. Would not a mother know?"

A *mozo* had been dispatched for the Senora Dolores Estrella, and shortly she appeared. Once, undoubtedly, she had been a woman of great beauty; now, as with many Latin women, she had become fat and slightly sloppy about the body, while strangely enough, her features had grown thin and, as the judge had said, shrewish.

She acknowledged McAllen's greeting, glared at Chico Menchaca who stared back evilly and swept his green eyes over her grossness in such a fashion that she flushed and spat an angry phrase at him. To McAllen, she snapped, "Well, *señor,* you have brought me my money? And in American currency, I trust?"

"I am so sorry, *señora,*" said McAllen, "but there are one or two details which of a necessity must be cleared up first. Could we not walk past the fountain to speak in privacy?"

They could and did. She glared back over her shoulder at Chico, who blew a cloud of blue smoke from his nostrils insolently and grimaced with disdain. "That one I hate," snarled the *señora.* "He is filled with evil, as Raul was."

Her husband? Of course it was her husband who was slain! Who else? Everyone on the hacienda including herself, knew what had been going on between Raul and Cuca Gonzales. He received exactly what he deserved, Raul Estrella, and had not she herself, his own lawful wife, warned him many times that he would end up so? Now the important thing was when she would receive her money. And she knew she was entitled to double indemnity, too, though she had not mentioned it, and would thank McAllen for keeping it to himself.

"What will you do with the money, *señora?* You will stay on here at the hacienda and perhaps make improvements?"

Her laugh was scornful. "On this bit of hell, *señor?* Once this was a mighty hacienda, as were the others inherited by my dead husband, may he rot in his grave. Now they are nothing. Besides, the government takes over here shortly. Ah, no. With my money I go to Mexico City to live like a great lady. And, perhaps," she preened herself, "who can tell, I shall marry again! I am not too old, though a little fat, and the money will make me attractive to many. Is it not so?"

McAllen admitted that it was so. And shortly afterward, he and Chico Menchaca walked back to the store. If Señora Dolores Estrella were acting, thought McAllen, she was superb. She did not impress him as being sufficiently clever to put on such a show. She was interested only in the money she expected to receive.

And Raul's mother, ancient, old-fashioned, undoubtedly honorable. Most certainly she would not participate in any plot to defraud an American company or any other. Still, there was the searching of his bag in the *posada* at Rodriguez, there was the whiteclad *peon* who shadowed them. There were Raul Estrella's gambling losses, the coming governmental expropriation. Everything was too pat, too perfect. But more and more it appeared as if there was but one way to make certain the victim of a righteously enraged husband had been Raul Estrella.

TUERTO, the hacienda jefe, was still in the store brooding over a glass of pulque. Of a certainty he would show the gringo the grave of Raul Estrella. It was right over the rise, in the family *cimenterio.* The headstone, freshly carved, read: *Raul José Maria Estrella —1911-1940* and the grave still bore faded flowers from the funeral and fresh flowers recently put in place.

Back in the store, when Tuerto had gone his way enriched, Chico Menchaca said, "Did you see him, Big One? Back in the trees to the right, someone who watches the *cimenterio?"*

McAllen nodded grimly. "I go," he said, "to see Cuca Gonzales. It is better that I go alone, *Mala Suerte."*

But no sooner was he outside and walking through the mud of the half street than Menchaca, too, faded through the door like a shadow, and trotted past the hacienda at right angles to McAllen's chosen path.

The Gonzales home was the last to the far side of the hacienda proper, lonely among the twisted *mesquites* that surrounded it. The front door was closed, the place had a deserted appearance. McAllen rapped sharply. Again.

A voice, thick with sleep, called from within, *"Quien es? Que pasa?"* 'Who is it? What happens?'

"A friend," answered McAllen in Spanish. "A friend from the *Estados Unidos* with a great amount of money for the Señora Estrella."

Which opened the door. She stood there, half in, half out of the house, her large, suspicious eyes still heavy with sleep, her mouth a provocative crimson blotch in the half shadows.

"Now what, *señor?"*

He repeated the lie. One of two things he wanted: to get into the house or to get her outside, in order that he might watch her reactions, her eyes, her features.

"And what has that to do with me, *señor?* Why do you awaken me to tell me that?"

He shrugged. "I thought you might be interested. Señora Estrella also thought so; she asked me to inform you. I have another message as well."

The dark eyes flashed, the red lips curled. "Señora

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Estrella!" she sneered. "That fat pig of a woman, that sow, that obscene grossness! *Un momentito, señor!* One moment!"

Shortly she joined him outside her door. McAllen noted that she wore an American-made housecoat, not cheap, but expensive, and as she had not bothered to close it all the way, the soft pink of a sheer, silken nightgown was visible. She sucked hungrily at a cigarette, said, "and the other message, *señor?*"

"You sleep late, *señora,*" he countered and flashed his best smile. She returned it, with interest, and said that she slept late because she slept badly, that she was worried because her most beloved husband was yet in the *juzgado,* down by the store.

McAllen laughed archly, and answered, "A thousand thousand pardons, *señora,* but I was led to believe that you were not one to worry about a husband."

"I am not a bad woman." She smiled. "It is only that I have here within me, a fire." Her fingers pressed a soft breast; she dropped her eyes demurely. "And Pablo has forgiven me, *señor.*"

SO THEY talked of this, and spoke of that, and after a while McAllen worked around to it. "It is true," he said, "that I am to pay the widow of Raul Estrella a large amount of money, a most formidable amount, in American currency. But there are formalities. It is my job, you understand? And I must make certain it was Raul who was killed by your justly angered husband."

He thought she looked at him oddly, thought her eye lashes flickered to cover the sudden shrewdness in her eyes. "It was Raul, *señor.* It is of a sureness that I should know." She giggled, dropped the cigarette, ground it out beneath her heel. "You may with assurance pay the money, for Raul is dead. You pay that cow of a woman today? No?"

"I did not bring the cash here," he lied, "but left it safely in Rodriguez."

"But you will assuredly inform me when you pay her?"

"Why, *señora?*"

"So that I may rejoice! She will take the money and go away, and shall be happy! I hate that one much, *señor!*"

No sooner had McAllen returned to the store than Chico strolled up from the opposite direction. McAllen was half angry.

"Look, *Mala Suerte,*" he snapped, "I told you to await me here. What have you been doing?"

Chico Menchaca showed his white teeth. "Your work," he said softly. "While you talked to the woman of fire at the front of the house, I went in the back. It was interesting, Big One."

"Why, damn you! You'd have ruined everything if—hey, what was so interesting?"

"Undoubtedly she was loved by Raul Estrella, Big One. She has a suitcase packed with gringo clothing. Mostly those silken nothingnesses that lie so close to a woman's heart."

"Packed? You mean—"

Chico raised his shoulders. "Offhand I would say she is prepared to leave this most miserable Hacienda del Potrero at the drop of a straw sombrero. Also she slept late because she was out last night, gone where the mud is deep, and redder than this close about, where there are many thorn trees and much cactus, much undergrowth."

"And how would you know that?"

"Because there is a pair of *huaraches* covered with sandy, red mud, not yet dry. Because a skirt hangs on a chair, yet damp from contact with wet leaves and torn in many places by thorns."

Slowly McAllen lighted a cigarette, staring at the nonchalant Chico all the while. A glimmer of truth and actuality was beginning to shine through the black clouds of this precious muddle.

Menchaca said, "This Pablo Gonzales, her man. I know him."

McAllen tossed the cigarette away. "Come," he said. "We go."

THE keeper of the store was also the keeper of the jail. It was necessary to get permission from Señora Dolores Estrella before it was permitted one to speak with the prisoner, but this was easily obtainable. The Estrella women were anxious to cooperate, to remove all obstacles to their receiving the great amount of American gold which was to come to them.

The jail was next to the store, a large one-storied adobe hut with a sheet-iron roof and barred windows, and a series of strap-iron bars forming squares near its front which left a hall or foyer some few feet in depth. A man snored gently on a cot beneath the window at the rear. When the jailer-storekeeper had departed, Chico Menchaca called softly, "*Ai,* Pablo Gonzales, thou stealer of burros!"

In the faint light McAllen saw the eyes of the sleeper flip open. "*Ai,* Pablo Gonzales," continued Menchaca, "thus it is I warned you Fate would overtake you. Tomorrow you will hang by the neck for the killing of a man!"

Pablo Gonzales sat on the edge of his cot. His deft fingers quickly twisted a cigarette, a match flared, revealing dark, pock-marked features, a flat, wide nose and thick, sensual lips.

He cursed, long and pleasantly, ending, "and what does Chico Menchaca do at the Hacienda del Potrero?"

He arose, proving to be a short, squat fellow of enormous width. He approached the strap-iron on short, bowed legs, barefooted, prehensile toes gripping the dirt floor of the *juzgado* as he walked—like those of an ape.

"I came to see you hang, Pablo. To tell you what a great fool you are, and I bring my friend, Señor McAllen, who wishes to tell you the same. Once you were full of youth and daring and a bit of wisdom. Now you belch with too many years in your belly and your head is as dizzy as that of the great *borracho* himself!"

Now they faced each other through the squares made by the strap-iron, and Pablo Gonzales had both hairy hands on the bars.

"That is not truth." He smiled around his cigarette. "Tomorrow or the next day, they set me free. What did I? I but killed my wife's lover, and all men have that right!"

"*Ai!* You fool! And suppose this man came to you and said, Pablo, we will pretend this thing; we will pretend that I love your wife, Cuca; pretend that you kill me, and I will pay you much money! And you, poor fool, not knowing he was *really* the lover of your wife, agreed! Suppose he did that?"

Pablo said, softly, "The man of whom you speak, *amigo,* he is dead. No?"

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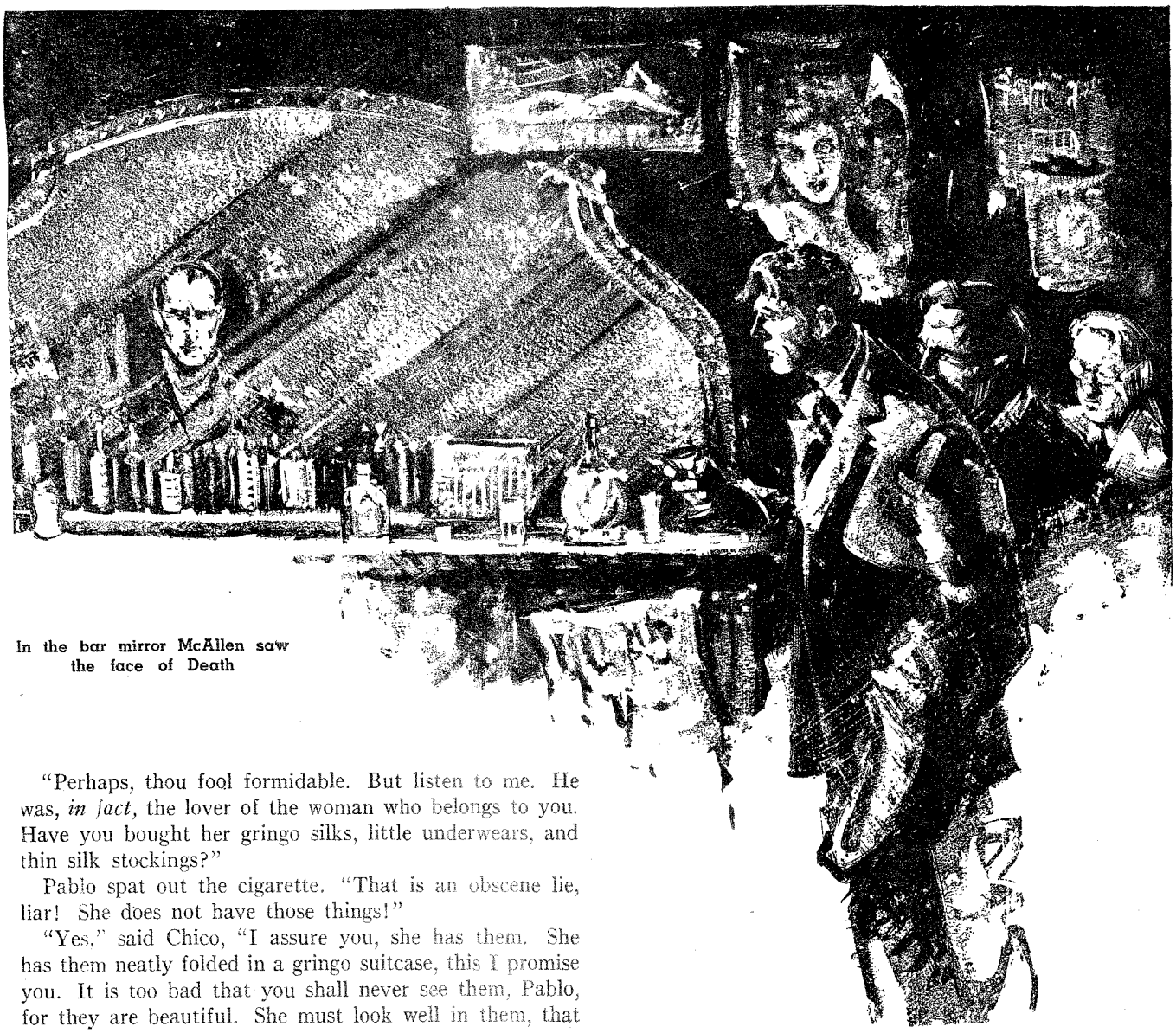

In the bar mirror McAllen saw the face of Death

"Perhaps, thou fool formidable. But listen to me. He was, *in fact,* the lover of the woman who belongs to you. Have you bought her gringo silks, little underwears, and thin silk stockings?"

Pablo spat out the cigarette. "That is an obscene lie, liar! She does not have those things!"

"Yes," said Chico, "I assure you, she has them. She has them neatly folded in a gringo suitcase, this I promise you. It is too bad that you shall never see them, Pablo, for they are beautiful. She must look well in them, that woman of fire."

"What do you mean, I shall never see them? Tomorrow, or the next day! And I shall beat her magnificently!"

"This is my *amigo,* McAllen, who comes from the insurance company, Pablo."

Pablo nodded. His eyes, hot and sultry, narrowed, grew shrewd, as had those of his wife.

McALLEN said, "Chico is right—you are a great fool, Pablo. Suppose this man of whom we speak is not dead? Suppose you made a mistake and killed another?"

"It was Raul Estrella. I saw him. And such has been admitted to me by my repentant wife, who is a woman of fire."

"But suppose it was another, Pablo. Suppose Raul Estrella was in hiding. Suppose your repentent wife who is a woman of fire was feeding him—and staying with him. Suppose this woman of yours was packed, and ready to leave, as soon as this man of whom we speak could steal the insurance gold from his shrew of a *señora?*"

"An *Americano* opens his mouth and naught but lies emerges! Raul Estrella I killed. Ask of his wife, of his mother, of my wife!"

"I said merely suppose, Gonzales, suppose! If what I say was so, do you think this man would allow you to go free? Would he not see you dragged out of here to a scaffold, or shot against a wall, or even here in the jail, so that you might not talk, so that he might not pay you, so that he might possess the woman of fire who is your wife without danger?"

"Raul Estrella is dead, gringo liar." But his voice shook as he walked back to the cot to fumble at the black tobacco and corn husks.

"All right," sang out McAllen, "you are the wise one; you are the caged monkey who knows everything that goes on in the world outside. But you do not want to know that your wife is unfaithful, not in fancy, but in fact!"

"If I were out of here," growled Gonzales, "and your throat was between my two hands—"

McAllen laughed at him. "Great fool," he jeered, "for fifty or one hundred *pesos* you do this thing, while the man of whom we speak will recover from his *señora,* once she has been paid, well over two million *pesos!*"

"I know nothing of this insurance thing," grumbled Pablo. "I but know I killed a man." He sucked hungrily on the cigarette. "How much did you say, *señor?*"

"Five hundred thousand dollars American. He mentioned but half of that to you, is that not truth?"

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The man on the cot shrugged. "He mentioned nothing. Only my gun spoke, loudly, shouting aloud as I killed him. Ask his mother, ask of his widow, of my wife."

McAllen turned away, disgusted. Chico Menchaca called, "We go, thou great and obscene fool who will not see and who holds his hands over his ears. Perhaps we see you again, if this man of whom we spoke does not kill you first."

"Chihuahua!" snarled Pablo Gonzales. He lies deep, this man of whom you speak, and the worms feast on him. I killed him. I know! *Vamos!"*

They rode back to Rodriguez then, McAllen turning it all over in his mind. He was convinced by now that Raul Estrella was alive; he could almost—he thought—recount the whole plot, detail by detail. From Menchaca, and from actually seeing the man, he knew what Gonzales was, an *hombre malo, muy malo,* a bad, bad man.

Suppose, he told himself, that Raul Estrella was practically broke, and faced expropriation as well. Suppose he was actually in love with Cuca Gonzales, but scared to death of her husband, Pablo. This insurance plot would be perfect, it would knock off two or three birds with one stone. First, there'd be the importation of a bum about his same size and general build. The dressing of the bum in Estrella's clothing, putting the Estrella ring on the bum's finger. Coöperation on Pablo' spart, for a price, after making certain that the people of the *hacienda,* including his wife, learned he was making a play for Cuca Gonzales.

What would be more natural and logical? A double-barreled shotgun to blow the bum's features away, identification by a horror-stricken mother, a soured wife, and a mistress. Gonzales clapped in jail to await trial. Estrella in hiding, Cuca feeding him. Insurance money paid to the widow. Estrella emerging from hiding to take it away from her, Pablo to be knocked off in jail, and a hey-nonny-nonny! Cuca and Raul, rich, going away to start a new life.

"Could be," he grumbled aloud, and Chico Menchaca laughed as if he read McAllen's thoughts.

THERE is no moon in the world like a Mexican moon. It is a silver balloon tossed carelessly against the inverted blue bowl of the sky, and the red sparks that are a million stars somehow fail to explode it. Rodriguez slept, that night. But not McAllen.

Cautiously—but not too cautiously—he raised the tight and squeaky window in the *posada;* cautiously—but not too cautiously—he pushed back the shutter. He slid a leg into the moonlight, pulled his great body after it and stood upright, shaking himself like a dog aroused from sleep.

Some fifty yards away stood the dark hulk of the sedan that had brought them down, a company car. He reached into the shadow behind him to pick up a long-handled shovel and a pickaxe. These he placed over his shoulder before starting for the car. He opened the rear door, laid the instruments carefully inside, closed the door, opened the front and grunted his way beneath the wheel.

For a moment the starter spun fruitlessly, doubly loud because of the silence of the silver night. Somewhere a dog barked. And from the shadow of a *retama* the *peon* clad in white emerged, to open the front door. The moon gleamed and glittered on the gun in his hand, whitened his teeth as he smiled politely.

"The *señor* returns to the *Estados Unidos,* perhaps?"

McAllen sputtered, "why, no—that is to say—well, I'll tell you, I could not sleep. I go for a ride to soothe my nerves. Hey, put the gun away, *amigo."*

The *peon* laughed. "And the spade and the pick, they could not sleep either? I think you should return to bed, *señor!"*

"Nuts! *Chihuahua!* If you think I'm up to something get in and go with me. But gun or no gun I'm not going back to bed. Come on, get in. Or are you afraid?"

For answer the *peon* stepped into the car, warily, his gun ready, his eyes sharp and hard. He sat down, said, "Very well, *señor,* we ride then. We—"

He said no more, for the lean, wiry arm of Chico Menchaca came from the darkness of the rear seat to pass around his brown throat like an encircling boa, while McAllen's swiftly striking hand snatched the gun away before his finger could squeeze the trigger.

Suddenly, there in the reflected moonlight, McAllen saw the gleam of Menchaca's knife blade. "Do not kill him!" he gasped and Chico laughed. The heavy butt of the reversed knife slashed downward to thud behind the *peon's* ear. He went limp and loose and lax, and when Chico struck him again behind the other ear, his breathing became stertorous and gasping.

"He is not dead," said Chico scornfully, "though he would be better so. Come, Big One, I have the mules."

They took the spade and the pick, and this time keeping well within the shadows, made the limits of town, where Menchaca had picketed two mules which he had lassoed earlier in the night.

BY TWO o'clock they were circling the Hacienda del Potrero, heading for the rise beyond which lay the graveyard. Still sheltered by that same rise, they dismounted, and Chico Menchaca went circling off to the left.

McAllen gave him ten minutes. Then he remounted and rode boldly to the top of the little *monte* so that he might be seen from below. The mule paced sedately forward; and McAllen's skin crawled, crawled with the thought of the bullet which might be his reception from the watcher in the thicket.

But Chico Menchaca was a workman. It was he who stepped from the shadows and pointed over his shoulder in answer to McAllen's raised brows. So together, there in the moonlight, two men, a Mexican killer and an American troubleshooter, went to work. Dirt flew, and at last the pick thudded into the coffin itself. Mexican coffins being what they are, the stench was bad. McAllen stepped from the shallow grave.

"All right, *Mala Suerte,"* he whispered hoarsely, "now you begin to earn your fee. Here." He handed him a slab of wax, specially prepared for the undertaking. "There must be a few teeth left, at least. I want an impression of them."

Chico Menchaca shrugged and took the wax. McAllen turned away. The moon seemed to ride the billowing clouds like a skiff in a ground swell. Off in the distance a hunting owl boomed, and farther back in the hills a coyote wailed reassurance to his mate.

Afterwhile, Chico Menchaca, sweat covered and hiss-

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ing slightly handed the wax to McAllen. "*Madre de Dios,*" he said, "there is a smell about the dead that is provoking. What now, Big One?"

"The grave, the way it was," instructed McAllen. He was fumbling at his money belt for the impressions from Doc Steele, who had done Estrella's teeth. He needed no flashlight, nor even a match, so bright was that balloon of a moon.

Only one tooth was missing from the man who lay rotting in the coffin, an upper, from the very front. His lips had protected the rest from the shotgun blast. And before Menchaca had finished refilling that grave, McAllen was laughing soft and low, there in the moonlight.

The man in the grave was not Raul Estrella. The arc of his teeth, the curve from wisdom tooth to wisdom tooth, was even different from that of Estrella. And McAllen could find no evidence of fillings or bridges or other dental work at all.

When Chico had finished he came to McAllen, holding something in his left hand, polishing it with a handkerchief in his right.

"This man is not Raul Estrella, Chico," said McAllen. Chico shrugged. He thrust his left hand out into the moonlight and his breath came fast in admiration. McAllen gasped. All he could say was, "Great God! You grave robber!" For the head of a snarling tiger glistened from the ring on Menchaca's left hand. The great emerald in its mouth gleamed and glittered and danced and sparkled in the moonlight.

He said, "Well, *Borracho,* we settle this tonight then, and go back to San Antonio, no?"

"I think yes," admitted McAllen, still awed and a little sickened.

"Then we go to see Cuca Gonzales," said Menchaca, as if he commanded, and keeping deep in the shadows, they departed, McAllen bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER VI

WHERE THE TOAD HIDES

MENCHACA took the immense padlock from the *juzgado* door with a piece of rusty wire and a nail-file. Once inside he called, "Sssssst. Pablo Gonzales, make no sound!"

In a moment, from the impenetrable blackness on the other side of the strap-iron, came his answer. "You, Chico, and the gringo liar? What now in the middle of the night? Can a man not sleep?"

Chico chuckled. "Not when his wife in unfaithful. I come to tell you, Pablo, that the woman of fire is not at home. And where would she go, *mi amigo?*"

"You lie, damn you! Let me out of here, and I will split the obscene and lying throats of you and your liar friend."

Chico laughed in the darkness. It is thou whose throat will be cut! Estrella lied to you about the money so he would not have to pay you so much. You know he did! And everyone at the hacienda knew about him and your *señora,* your woman of fire, except you! That love affair was not pretended—it flamed, thou great fool!"

"Liar! And son of a liar!"

"Then where is she tonight, cuckold?"

She sleeps, at home in her bed!"

"Then how did I get this, cuckold?"

He flipped on the flashlight. It revealed the leather suitcase. Opened, the undergarments it gave forth were ridiculous and absurd for their thinness, their scantiness.

"Did you give her these, fool? Has she worn them for you?" He held up the thinnest of negligees. "Since you are safely in jail she leaves them openly in their case, packed and ready, so she may flee with Raul Estrella when the insurance money has been paid and he has taken it from his wife!"

"Estrella is dead! I, Pablo, killed him!"

"Do not play with me! I know thee of old. We have opened the grave, my friend and I. The man mouldering there is not Estrella! Estrella even now is with your wife!"

"You could not tell! The face, I blew it away! You—"

"But the teeth, fool, they were there. And the teeth were not those of Raul Estrella! My friend knows of such things, cuckold! Someone will meet death for that killing, Pablo Gonzales, and it will not be Raul Estrella, who even now lies safely hidden in the soft arms of—"

"Stop it!"

Chico turned the flash full upon him. The little black pig eyes, so deeply set, peered out madly from beneath the busky brows. A dry tongue flicked out to lick at dryer lips. Perspiration was on Pablo Gonzales' forehead, his cheekbones, his swollen upper lip. He backed away, his forearm before his eyes.

"There can be justice," said Chico softly. "Often there is a right that is infallible, and must prevail. Suppose you were a man named Raul Estrella, a man plotting to cheat a friend of much money, and his wife as well. Where, if you were this man, would you hide? Surely not in the hacienda?"

A hoarse whisper floated to them. "Oh, most surely not in the hacienda, not if my mother and my shrew of a wife believed me truly dead." The whisper died away and the sound of heavy breathing filled every corner. "But I might go carefully through the maguey field bearing always to the westward. And I might find there a faint path leading down into the *arroyo.*" Again that husky breathing. "Better, perhaps, that one who knows the way should show you the possibilities?"

"Nay, nay, you are too angry. We shall return, my friend and I, to take you out of here . . . and in the *arroyo,* what?"

"Perhaps, Chico, thou slayer of men, if the *arroyo* were followed not more than two kilometers, a careful searcher might find a path leading upward, on his right, which seemed to go nowhere. But if he followed that path carefully, and rolled aside the rock at the top, he might find another path, and though the going may be hard, practically without doubt he might feel assured of finding that which he sought. That is to say, a man who would rob a man of money and of his wife, who is a woman of fire."

AND so the pair of them went out into the moonlight again, leaving the suitcase full of woman's finery for Pablo Gonzales to tear into small bits, each piece being cursed separately with its own foul and damning oath. They fought their way through the immense field planted to the towering and spiny maguey, bearing always to the west. And there they found the path, faint but dis-

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cernible, that led them downward into the deep *arroyo*.

"One, two, three, four," counted McAllen softly, for he had no other way of measuring distance, and Pablo had said approximately two kilometers. When his count reached two thousand he went more slowly and cast the rays of the flash along the steep wall to his right. Presently he found what he sought.

They toiled up the path, two men unafraid, McAllen tense with jubilation because success was at hand. And then they were in a second and more shallow *arroyo*, bearing off to the north. Soon, but not too soon, they reached the hidden clearing, and the moon had made its journey and was now beginning to collapse disconsolately toward the horizon. It was Chico Menchaca who skirted the little clearing like a jungle cat, and returned to report the presence of a small hut, hidden on the far side of the clearing.

"And, Big One," he chuckled, "two sleep within. We await the dawn?"

"Hell, no!" snapped McAllen. "Let's go. Stay well behind me for I do the talking."

Softly, softly, McAllen pushed open the thick door of the adobe hut, so nearly concealed in the tangled undergrowth. But it creaked. A voice whispered, "Is it thou, Tuerto, Ramon? *Quien es?* What is it?"

McAllen snapped on his flashlight, thrust his gun into its beam. It bathed the sleepy and startled Estrella; the sultry brown eyes of the woman beside him snapped open.

She squealed, jerked the *serape* over her head.

"Easy, Estrella," said McAllen in a hard voice. "McAllen, of the insurance company, speaks to thee. Easy; keep your hands quiet!"

Estrella's face was pasty; his eyes rolled from side to side. "You, *Americano*," he chattered, "you shall be my partner in this. Double indemnity! Over two million *pesos!* And half shall be yours!"

"I hear. And I spit in thy obscene face, dog. Get up and dress. We go fast, you and I."

"Where, McAllen? Where do you take me? I swear—"

"Swear nothing to me! I take you to Neuva Laredo. There the authorities will send for Pablo Gonzales and together the two of you will talk. Who was the man your murdered, Estrella? What poor luckless hombre played your role?"

"I murdered no one! Not I! It was Pablo Gonzales! Some man, do doubt, he caught with this she-cat—"

Cuca Gonzales sat up. The thin gringo gown fell from the creamy tawniness of her shoulders, and her eyes blazed, her lips curled. "Toad," she snarled. "I have expected this more and more for the past few days! You would let Pablo be killed in jail! You would kill your *señora* as you robbed her. And you would have deserted me, perhaps even slain me! Toad!"

Nails on her curled fingers tore strips of skin from his pasty face, and he leaped screaming from the pallet of blankets on the floor.

Now his fear of that flaming woman was so great that he had forgotten his other fear for an instant—fear of discovery and punishment.

"Easy, Estrella," roared McAllen. "You're all through! Your insurance will be cancelled, and they'll shoot you against an adobe wall! Dress!"

Slowly, Estrella walked to the cowhide kitbag standing against the wall.

CHAPTER VII

GO DEMON

HE FOUND me in the lobby of the hotel right after lunch. His clothes were wet and mud-covered, torn in many places as if by thorns; his face was scratched and his left arm was in a sling made from his scarf. He came directly to me.

"*Señor,*" he said cautiously, "I think it wise for you to cross the bridge and get your friend—before the police get him."

I leaped up. "Where is he, what happened, what is he doing?"

"What does he do? He drinks, as always, the *borracho*, he drinks." The thin lips were bitter, and the green eyes glowed with hate. His right hand strayed to the arm in the sling. "He sits at a table in the Cantina del Campana Plata and drinks and laughs. I think if you do not get him across the bridge the police will put him in jail soon and throw the key away, though why I bother to tell you this I do not know."

"What happened, man? What's wrong with your arm? Is McAllen all right?"

"Except that he is growing very drunken, *señor*. My arm? That is where your *amigo* shot me, *señor*. Me, Chico Menchaca, who was his helper, who saved his life." And again his eyes blazed. "And when you see him and he is sober enough to understand, tell him I am ready always; tell him I do not fear him or his threats!"

"Threats?" I asked dumbly.

Chico hissed. "He calls me his *mala suerte*," he said bitterly. "Now he says he must kill me to live himself! *Chihuahua! Adios, señor.*"

And he was gone.

I hurried across the bridge to the Cantina of the Silver Bell, and McAllen was there, all right. He was sitting at a table, and on the table was a bottle of tequila, a bottle of *anise*, a bottle of *sotol* and a bottle of *berreteaga*. There were four glasses, all full, and when I entered he began laughing.

"My friend, John Rickey," he giggled. "I drink, *amigo*, I drink to the death of a jinx! I drink to murder, soon to be done!" And right down the line he went, one two, three, four.

"Great God, McAllen," I said, "don't get started. I saw Menchaca! Let's get out of here, he says the police will pick you up any time. Where's the car?"

"In Rodriguez, Rickey, *mi amigo*." He was filling the glasses again. "My report has been made out and mailed, Rickey. My resignation went with it. You will tell Martha that as long as my bad luck, my jinx, walks the face of the earth I cannot marry her. She would be marrying a potential killer. A future murderer, Rickey, a murderer, me, McAllen!"

"Come on, Mac," I pled with him. "It'll come out okay. Come over to the hotel and take a good bath and clean up, get back on your feet. I'll wire Martha to stop the letter, the report and the resignation. Come on, Mac."

Straight down the row he went, one, two, three, four again. He growled, "Sit down, Rickey, I want to talk a little while. Then I am going to get very drunk. I have lost my job, I have lost the woman I love. I have lost

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five hundred dollars which I borrowed and I have lost a company car. All because of living luck, luck that walks, that lives! Bad luck! *Mala Suerte!* Sit down, damn you, and listen to me!"

NERVOUSLY I sat down, and he began to talk. He gave me the story as a writer might inscribe it on white paper, detail by detail, and his tongue was merely loose, not thick. And nearing the end, he paused to refill his glasses.

Impatiently I said, "All right, McAllen. Don't stop at the climax! What happened? Where is Estrella now? The woman, Cuca, remains in the bed. Estrella you left walking toward his kitbag to get dressed. What happened? Where is he?"

"Everything will be all right once I kill Menchaca," said McAllen solemnly.

"Estrella?" I said.

"Estrella reached into the kitbag," said McAllen, baring his teeth, "and he came up with a Luger. He shot the light out of my hand and might have killed me had I not dropped and rolled."

"You mean he got away? Hell, Mac, that isn't bad!"

"He ran for the door, John Rickey. Scuttled like a fat little spider, his breath like steam from a panting locomotive! And there was some noise at the door, John Rickey, and after a while I rose and lit a match. That devil Menchaca was wiping his knife with a handkerchief. And—"

He began to laugh. He shook with it, he roared, he trembled convulsively, the tears running down his face. "And I held the match, John Rickey, and there, half in and half out of the door lay Raul Estrella. Chico had not only disemboweled him, but had slit his throat from ear to ear! There he lay, John Rickey, dead! Dead with a half million dollars worth of insurance on his head—just when I had my life all worked out!"

Shortly he quit laughing long enough to go down his little line of glasses again. I finally got him across the Border before the Mexican police got him, but I couldn't make him leave Laredo, Texas. There was nothing to do but give him what money I had and leave him there.

●

FOG in San Antonio is a peculiar thing. It is heavy, it hangs like an inverted wash pan a few feet above a man's head. And sometimes it acts strangely on acoustics. Ogden of the Omaha Branch, and I paused beside the car while I searched through my pockets for the keys. I had them in my hand when I heard the voice.

"No, no, I'm not worth it, my dear," he was saying. "I'm not fit to sit in the same car with you, and I tell you, something would happen. Go away, my dear, leave me alone. I'm a killer. Every night in my dreams I kill a man—my luck! Stay away from me, for some day I'll have a drink too many, and I'll meet him, and I'll actually kill him. Would you want a murderer in the car with you?"

"Don't talk like a fool, Mac!" There were tears in her voice. "Get in, I tell you! I've been waiting hours; I've got to talk to you! Don't you understand, we've got to work this out some way. Damn you, I'm supposed to marry another man in a few days and I can't make myself do it. Get in, Mac!"

"Marry? Marry? Why—why, sure, Martha. I hope you'll be very happy. I hope you won't worry then so much about me and my *Mala Suerte*. You know, Martha, luck is alive. It walks the face of the earth. It's Nemesis, and it follows a man, waiting for him to make a turn. Then, just when things are rosy, there it is, this bad luck, always ready to get him, just when he least expects it. And you've got to kill it, Martha, like a snake, or a mad dog. Kill it! I hope—"

"Will you get in here, or do I drag you in?"

It was pitiful, all right. Mac, half crazy with liquor and brooding and his damnable "luck that lives" obsession, and practically not worth the powder necessary to blow him up. But Martha, loving him all these months, unable to put him out of mind.

We were parked next the alley. I heard the footsteps before I saw the man. He was almost running, but when he reached the sidewalk he hesitated, slowed, seemed to pull himself together. A match flared in the fog, and for a brief second I saw his face. It was the man with the handlebar mustaches, who had stood at the end of the bar, who had departed with a frightened and pasty face when Chico Menchaca had first entered. The man whose brother Chico had knifed to death four days ago, according to rumor.

The match went out. The red eye of the cigarette gleamed for a moment then the smoker hurried away.

Another man came out of the alley. He was covered with water and mud, as though he had fallen many times. And something else wet, but thicker and shinier than water gleamed on the front of him, too. He caromed off the wall of the bar, missed the curb of the alley completely and fell face downward in a puddle of water. The faint glow from the steamy window of the pool hall shone down on him. The bone handle of a knife stood upright between his shoulderblades.

Into the shaky square of flickering illumination came McAllen, still dragging his trenchcoat. He leaned over the motionless figure which dammed the gutter. He muttered, "No! No!" in disbelief. And then he began to laugh. He laughed the way he had laughed in Neuvo Laredo when he told me the Estrella story.

I started for him, but Martha was first. She seized him by the arm. Horror stricken she gazed at the dead man in the gutter and questioned me with her eyes. All I could do was nod.

We got him into the car with her and he laid his head over on her shoulder and laughed like a hysterical woman. "Hospital?" I asked.

"To my apartment," she said, and damn my eyes, she sounded happy! The car roared into life and disappeared into the mist and the fog. I ran for my own hack, where Ogden, wide eyed, was waiting. Off in the distance we heard the wail of a police siren.

Ogden muttered, "Let's go, Rickey."

So we drove away, too. And the dead man with his heart cut out and the knife buried in his back, the dead man who lay face downward in an alley gutter, was McAllen's Nemesis, his *Mala Suerte*, his bad luck, who would walk the earth no more.

It was Chico Menchaca.

THE END

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Seven Mile House

By Max Brand

WHEN ALEXANDER KENNEDY finds a dead man in a deserted canyon of the West, he is caught up in a mysterious web of crime. The man was killed by a rockslide, which Kennedy is sure was deliberately engineered; and not far from the body Kennedy finds a wounded dog.

It is this dog that leads him to Seven Mile House, a remote desert inn. Here the dead man is identified as one WILLIAM HARRISON, a mining promoter and ex-lawyer who had been a guest at the inn for several days. What particularly interests Kennedy is the strange behavior of JULIE VERNON, the lovely young woman who runs the inn; she is in great fear of something.

That fear is partly explained when Kennedy learns from a newspaper clipping that a girl named JESSICA VANCE was once tried and acquitted on a murder charge, and that William Harrison was her lawyer. Kennedy is certain that Julie Vernon is Jessica Vance, and so Julie may be the murderer of Harrison, who possibly was blackmailing her.

BUT there are three guests at the inn who had an opportunity to engineer that fatal rockslide. They are CAMILLA CUYAS, an exotic and moody Spanish refugee; ALEXANDER MACDONALD, a big, genial engineer; and DANIEL FARGO, a former cattleman, who is in love with Julie Vernon.

The key to the mystery lies with the big shepherd dog. Kennedy is convinced that someone at Seven Mile House is its owner—and the murderer; and he is borne out in that by the fact that several attempts are made to kill the dog. Indeed, Kennedy himself barely escapes from the hands of the unknown murderer.

When a woman named MRS. MORREL arrives at Seven Mile House, Alexander Kennedy is able to follow the strange pattern a step further, for she knows the dog and Kennedy overhears her speak to it in Italian, calling it Naldo. Mrs. Morrel admits that she knew Harrison well, and under the shock of learning about his death, she exclaims that he must have been murdered. Something else about the Morrel woman puzzles Kennedy; from her manner it is apparent that she has known the big engineer MacDonald and well, but they pretend to be strangers.

MRS. MORREL asks for a guard by her door that night, and Kennedy agrees to sleep in the anteroom, with the dog Naldo and a gun. A few hours later her seemingly unreasonable fear is justified, for Kennedy, awakened by Naldo, enters her room to find her dead on the floor, strangled by a piece of copper wire. Beside the body he finds an emerald—the property of Camilla Cuyas.

He goes at once to Camilla's room, and in her fright she admits that she visited the Morrel woman that night. For Camilla Cuyas is in love with Alexander MacDonald, and like Kennedy she had divined that MacDonald and Mrs. Morrel knew each other well. So in her sudden anger she went to the bedroom, and when she made violent accusations, Mrs. Morrel struck her. Camilla Cuyas admits all that, but when Kennedy demands what happened next, she says, trembling: "I'll say nothing more." . . .

Naldo threshed through the water —to save his master

CHAPTER XIII

THREAD OF GOLD

HE PUT Naldo back in the little anteroom where he had slept. To get there, he had to pass through the room of Mrs. Morrel. There was a strong temptation to cover that swollen face and the falsely dreaming eyes, but the police would want to see the body undisturbed. Word must be dispatched to the nearest officer of the law at once. So he went out down the hall to Julie Vernon's room at the far end of the corridor.

There was a line of very dim light under her door. It went out when he knocked. He didn't like that. The dim twilight in the hall seemed to fade into deeper darkness that closed in. And there was no sound in Seven Mile

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House. From all beneath that roof there was no sign of life and in his heart there remained that dreadful sense of unseen approach.

He knocked on the door again. It opened without a sound. The hall was almost daylight compared with the paint-black darkness within the room.

"Are you there?" he asked.

"Yes," said Julie Vernon in a clear, hard voice.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

"Well?" she asked.

"Will you make a light?"

"Isn't the darkness good enough?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then wait till the morning."

"I'm sorry that will hardly do."

After a moment she said: "Very well."

Her clothes made a receding whisper. A match scratched. It made a small blue arc of light, a queer little air-drawn hieroglyphic against blackness. Then yellow flame spurted, steadied. It showed her face and hands, the crystal bowl and slightly smoked chimney of a lamp. She drew up the chimney, touched the wick with the match, and pushed down the chimney again. It made a faint screech against the metal guards. Light began to pour through the room, losing its strength only in the corners.

It was a hard, bare room with a bit of gray matting by the bed. A tall chest of drawers had lost a good deal of paint. A couple of dim old photographs looked out with glimmering faces, ghosts of ghosts. Every one else in Seven Mile House had comfort, its mistress chose the worst. She lived like a cowpuncher in a bunkhouse.

That fine taste, that eye for warmth and grace she lavished only on her guests. Even her clothes were a mere property to charm her clients. To her own eyes she was sufficiently outfitted in a gray old shawl that her grandmother must have worn and it drank the color out of her face. It made her old. Coming into her room, Kennedy felt that he had entered a soul. He was astonished and shocked.

She stood back behind the lamp. "Do you see me well enough now?" she asked. Her eyes were on him steadily.

"Yes, thank you," he answered.

"Good," she said. "We try to please *all* our guests."

He felt her contempt. All the glow, all the femininity had left her.

"I wanted to ask you about tonight," he said. "If you don't mind, Miss Vernon."

"Vance is good enough," she said. "You know the real name. Why don't you use it?"

"I've no wish to use it, now or ever," he said.

She smiled tautly.

"Not if you get your price, of course. What *is* your price, Mr. Kennedy?"

"That's unkind," said Kennedy.

"Must I think about kindness, too?" she asked.

"Extraordinarily interesting," said Kennedy, deeply depressed but also adding a pace to his knowledge of this strange world. "Now you feel, apparently, that your back is against the wall, and all the pretense and the fine, smooth feathers of pretty manners are forgotten. Do all women simulate a weakness and a need to intrigue a man?"

"This is nonsense," she said.

"Ah, but I don't think so," said Kennedy. "I've gained a great deal for my notebook."

"What is it you want?" she asked.

"What I'd like most," said Kennedy, "is to get out of my bones the feeling that your friend Fargo is standing just outside of that door, ready to blow in the top of my head. I'm horribly afraid."

"Don't you see that it's no good to pretend simplicity and all that?" she asked. "I know that you're as clever and as cool—as a snake in the grass. Who sent you after me here?"

"No one. Only chance," he explained. "You see, being alarmed, and a little desperate, you now are over-reaching yourself. You jump at conclusions in the dark, and therefore you miss."

"I've had enough of this," she told him. "Come to your point or leave my room. If you're after money, make sense about it and I'll have to see what I can do."

"In that case," he said, "I only have to tell you that there has been a second death in Seven Mile House."

He watched her closely for it was his belief that the controllable mind will pour the light and shadows of its workings into the eyes no matter how we strive to suppress it, but now though the lamplight shone full in her face he could perceive not a flicker of change. He had to realize that already she was under such a tension that there was no slack to be taken up by new stresses. If the pool is frozen, he thought, the stones you throw will merely glance from the surface.

She merely said: "Then there will be still more for the police to do when they come. Will you get down to your business?"

"That is all the business I wanted to talk about," said Kennedy.

"You might as well come out with it now, as later," she told him.

He shook his head. There still was fear in him but there was pity also.

He said, deliberately: "Try to understand. So far as I'm concerned, you are Julie Vernon forever."

Then he got out of the room. So much emotion had escaped into the last words that a bit of moisture had entered his eyes, a thing he greatly regretted because it spoiled the clarity with which he had been studying the girl; he had only a blurred image of her beyond the lamp, a pale and set face.

He was thinking of this as he stood again in the hall, closing the door. Then on his right something stirred. To his startled mind it seemed at first only a step from him. Then he saw that it was the black silhouette of a man beyond the veranda window. Kennedy made himself thin against the wall but the man from the veranda came straight towards him up the corridor as though he could see in the dark.

By the style of his hat and the bigness around his shoulders, above all by something erect and poised and free in the bearing, Kennedy knew Daniel Fargo. The Westerner came up close and said: "Kennedy, isn't it?"

"That's right," said Kennedy.

"What in hell are you doing here?" asked Fargo.

"Bringing news," said Kennedy.

"What news is there tonight?" snapped Fargo.

"*Ancora imparo*," said Kennedy.

"If you're still learning," answered Fargo readily, "what do you know already that's worth hearing?"

One valuable thing at least was known to Kennedy now. The owner of the dog spoke Italian; so did Daniel Fargo. The dog's owner was as ruthless as a wild beast; and Fargo seemed as hard a man as Kennedy ever had known. There was no use considering soft-handed methods with him.

"Come with me," said Kennedy.

HE LED the way straight down the hall and into the room of Mrs. Morrel. The last time he was there he had lighted a lamp, so that now there was plenty of illumination for him to study the reactions of Fargo.

He felt at once that he might as well have studied the reactions of a Western mountain. That sun-blackened skin hardly could turn pale. As for expression, Fargo's

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jaw always seemed to set hard and there was a puckered, long-distance look about his eyes. Looking down at Mrs. Morrel, he said nothing at all but took out tobacco and wheat-straw papers from a vest pocket. He sifted tobacco into the creased paper and rolled the cigarette afterward with one unthinking hand. His match he lighted with a flick of his thumbnail.

It seemed to Kennedy that the man never would be through inhaling the first long, deep breath of smoke, and afterward the exhalation lasted even longer. A thin cloud silvered half the air of the room as Fargo said: "And you were in yonder?"

He kept staring at the dead woman but his long arm reached out and pointed in the direction of the anteroom. Almost at once there was a frantic outburst from the dog.

"*Fa quieta,* Naldo!" called Kennedy.

The dog subsided to a mournful complaint and then was still.

"Seemed to know your voice, didn't he?" said Kennedy, casually.

"My voice? Why should he know my voice?" asked Fargo, turning those cold, clear eyes of his on Kennedy.

"I'll bring him in here to keep quiet," suggested Kennedy.

He started toward the door, but Fargo commanded, sharply: "Leave the dog where he is!"

Kennedy turned back.

Fargo explained gruffly: "The sheriff will want to look things over without having the sign all messed up by a dog's feet."

He returned to his first thought.

"And you were sleeping right through it, in there?" he repeated.

"The dog woke me up, "said Kennedy.

"I mean," said Fargo, "that all through the struggle and the fall of the body and all that, you didn't hear a thing?"

"Not a whisper," said Kennedy, studying him.

"You're a good sleeper," said Fargo, sourly. "How did the dog wake you up?"

"By standing up and stalking toward the door, there. That much sound was enough to get my eyes open. If there had been a real struggle in here, I certainly would have heard it."

"She's no child," said Fargo. "She wouldn't die without putting up a fight."

"The excitement and the struggle," said Kennedy, "would have killed her pretty fast. And the rug is thick. It would muffle noises of feet."

"You know about things like this, do you?" asked Fargo.

He had a way of speaking before he turned his eyes, deliberately, on the face of Kennedy.

"I've read a little," said Kennedy.

"Reading!" echoed Fargo, and laughed without sound. "That gal would have made a noise," he declared. "And you were right in the next room."

"You mean that I may have killed her?" asked Kennedy.

"I'm not talking about meanings. I'm asking questions," said Fargo.

"We ought to get word to the police," said Kennedy.

"Sure. Sure," answered Fargo.

"Perhaps she hit her head on the floor in falling and was stunned, so that there was no struggle," said Kennedy.

"Looks like she wanted to tell us something," muttered Fargo. "There's no kind of trouble but what grows out of a woman."

"Or a strong man," continued Kennedy, "could have lifted her off the floor after he jerked the noose home. Her struggles would have been in the air then, and soundless enough."

He considered the strength of the big man with appreciation.

FARGO, as he stared at the fallen body, grew more and more uneasy. "It's bad. It's damned bad," he said. "It makes you think . . ."

He failed to say that it made him think, but pulled out a big handkerchief from the side pocket of his coat. Something tenuous and light fell from the pocket and made no sound upon the rug. Fargo was mopping his wet face.

"Let the law take hold and find out what it can," he said. "I'll get word to the sheriff. It's going to be a habit for him to send out mule-litters to carry in the dead from Seven Mile House."

"It's a pity for Miss Vernon," said Kennedy.

The big head of Fargo jerked around. His eyes took angry hold on Kennedy, like a hand.

"What's a pity for her?" he asked. "What's she got to do with it?"

"Why, my dear fellow, she has nothing to do with it, I suppose."

"There's a way of talking," said Fargo, "that ain't popular in these parts. It's all right for your big towns but it ain't worth a damn out in the West, here. You better pick up and learn some new talking manners."

"I've said nothing," Kennedy explained patiently, "except to point out that Miss Vernon is apt to lose a good deal of business after this."

"Never mind Miss Vernon. And damn business. Damn all business," said Fargo. "I've had enough of it. The hotel business be damned."

He turned toward the door into the hall. He paused and swung back to Kennedy a step, though not meeting him with his eyes.

"When people talk to you about this, you wanta think before you start chattering," said Fargo. "There's a lot of people have come to harm from talking too much in this part of the world."

"I dare say," agreed Kennedy politely.

"Yeah, but don't dare to say too much. That's the point," said Fargo.

He went out of the room with this sullen conclusion and left Kennedy staring at what had fallen from his pocket. It was a bright little wisp of copper wire, perhaps a foot long, but so fine that it looked more like gilded thread than metal.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DOG SPEAKS

KENNEDY sat in his room till the coming of dawn, wrapped in a blanket but shuddering in spite of it and not entirely from the cold; and all the while the dog crouched before the door that led to Mrs. Morrel's room, like a magnetic finger pointing toward the pole. Kennedy kept adding up his facts because when the sheriff came there were certain things that he would have to tell. He could guess that there had been a strong attachment between Harrison and Mrs. Morrel; and the two lovers both were dead.

This implied a logic that was far from accidental. It implied above all that one hand or set of hands had been occupied in the killings and inevitably the owner of the dog must be in some manner involved in the guilt. He had the grim assurance that, when the morning came and the hotel guests were up, it would be very odd indeed if Naldo were not given a chance to perform his act of loving identification.

After that he tried to stop thinking but pictures kept rising in his mind. Fargo, like a dark scarecrow, on the

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porch that night. Camilla Cuyas suddenly struck with awareness as she stared in the lounge at Mrs. Morrel and MacDonald or again with her head bowed, stubbornly refusing to speak a word; he heard her speak and watched the great dog slowly come toward her. He saw above all Julie Vernon in the toolshed with the dead man, and guarding herself from intrusion with the gun, and once more the words of the newspaper clipping drifted through his memory.

A sort of perversely obstinate surety kept rising in him. There was too much against her. It would not be the common course of events if she were the guilty person. There would be no story to it; and always at this point in his fancies he had to remember that this was no fiction of the mind but a blood-red reality.

After a while, though he was not aware that he had slept, he found that the woods outside his window had advanced out of the night. They stood black against a brilliant sky of dawn and somewhere birds were making a racket among the branches. He prepared to get up. This was to be his day, he felt, when everything was to come clear concerning the murders in Seven Mile House. It was to be his best day—or perhaps his last. He was gathering himself to rise and dress. Instead, the effort put him to sleep.

When he wakened, there was a tingle of distant voices at his ears, far off; and at his door a hand was knocking.

"Yes?" he called.

The voice of Fargo ordered, sternly: "Miss Vernon says that she told you that you'd be leaving this morning. Now she wants you to start; you and the dog hit the grit, Kennedy."

"Just a minute!" protested Kennedy, and getting from the couch quickly, he opened the door only to hear Fargo's retreating footfall already disappearing around the curve of the veranda at the end of the building.

The dizziness of this awakening from deep sleep remained with him for a moment. He felt that during his slumber the world had slipped an immeasurable distance past him and now he was suddenly being outlawed and driven from all chance to work out his problem for his own sake and that of society. The sun, when he got out on the veranda, he discovered to be nearly two hours higher in the sky. By this time perhaps half the guests were scattered from the tavern and he would have no chance again to find them all together unless he skulked and lurked about the premises until the close of the day again. For such skulkers and lurkers he imagined that Daniel Fargo might have very summary procedures in store. In a word, an hour or so of sleep had reduced him to somewhat of an absurdity.

WHEN he came down to the front of the house, he saw in fact that only seven or eight people were in sight, and these were gathered at the side of the mill-pond. Obviously they had not been permitted to know of the death of Mrs. Morrel. They were watching MacDonald's clumsy use of the paddle with which he was steering a fragile little canoe up and down the pool. With him in the boat sat Camilla Cuyas. Fargo, standing beside Julie Vernon, watched that progress and the women sent their shrilling laughter up the slope to Kennedy as MacDonald in turning the canoe almost capsized it.

One of the stablemen rode up on a swag-bellied little broncho.

"You name of Kennedy?" he asked.

"Yes," said Kennedy.

"The boss says I'm to see you over the hills," said the hired man. "Shall we start along?"

"I have to pick up my knapsack in the cabin, yonder," said Kennedy.

"I got it already packed," said the stableman, showing it strapped behind his saddle. He grinned at Kennedy. "Shall we shack along, partner?"

It was to be like that, then. Here, at the very verge of the wishing-gate, he was to be drifted out of the picture?

"I have to see Miss Vernon," said Kennedy.

"For what?" asked the man, pertinently.

He was a lean, dried-up fellow and he sat his horse in the way of the efficient cattleman. Out of a saddle holster near his knee appeared the worn handles of a revolver.

"I must pay my bill," said Kennedy.

"You can pay me," said the stableman. "Everything's been thought of," he added, with another grin.

"Very well, then," said Kennedy. "I'll go, but I'll leave the dog behind."

"You most particular are to take the dog along with you," declared the Westerner.

"But he's not mine," said Kennedy.

"There ain't nobody specially claiming him here," said the man on the horse. "So shall we just be drifting, brother?"

But there was outbreak of many voices by the pool as MacDonald in making a turn across the current actually tipped the canoe on its side. He and Camilla instantly were struggling in the water with everyone along the shore making an outcry and MacDonald's own voice sending a mellow shout of laughter up the hill.

Naldo promptly went mad. He tried to tug Kennedy down the hill. When that would not work, he whirled and leaped at his second master with a real devil in his eyes. Kennedy dropped the chain and jumped clear of the danger, while Naldo went down the hill like a racer.

"Now, I dunno about that . . ." drawled the stableman, and leaving Kennedy in the lurch, he galloped after Naldo down the slope. Kennedy hurried in pursuit. Here was the moment, at last, when the dog was sure to go straight to his owner. Every suspect was in sight.

Naldo was already only a jump from the people along the mill-pond. Fargo and Julie Vernon stood right in the path of the big beast. Kennedy's heart sank as he watched Naldo bearing down on them but they were not the forms in the eye of the dog. He shot past them, leaped from the bank, and headed straight for the place where Camilla, laughing, floundering in the water, was being supported by MacDonald. It was all very merry nonsense as Naldo bore down on them. Only Fargo shouted a warning. Neither Camilla nor MacDonald paid the least heed to Naldo's coming.

He lay out long and low in the water, his back entirely below the surface except where the shoulders labored and the head and neck stretched out in a line. He was right on them, now, and at the last instant MacDonald whirled over and saw him. Kennedy watched with every sense alert and heard the sharp, quick, exclamation of MacDonald. It might have been mere surprise or an irresistible impulse of fear. Yet this was no attack. It was a rescue.

Naldo caught MacDonald by the shoulder of his coat and tried with all his might to drag him to the safety of the shore. The guests along the shore began to applaud. It was story-book stuff, that scene, until MacDonald struck at the big dog and snarled some command. Poor Naldo, swimming off with his head turned, made slowly for the shore again and his master glanced hastily over the people by the water's edge until his eye came to Kennedy. There it paused for one eloquent instant.

Was it only fear, Kennedy wondered, that entered MacDonald, or was there also devising, considering malice? He tried to imagine the heaped-up confusion which must now be pouring on that mind, but all Kennedy could conceive, at that moment, was the picture of Naldo coming

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joyously on his master in dark of the trees and how the wire noose had been slipped over his neck as a reward.

AS MACDONALD waded ashore, assisting Camilla, Naldo backed away into the shallows, pointed his nose at the sky, and loosed once more that long wolf's howl which had roused the hotel the night before.

MacDonald silenced him with a word, but Naldo was now in a frenzy of delight, racing here and there, returning, leaping into the air near his master.

"But it's *your* dog, Mr. MacDonald," cried old Mrs. Lancaster. "How curious! It's been your dog all the time, hasn't it!"

"*A basso!*" commanded MacDonald.

Naldo, struck out of the very air, as it were, dropped to the ground and lay there trembling with happiness, his long tail sweeping from side to side, his eyes worshipping this divine creature, the master.

"I thought I was rid of him," said MacDonald. "I'll tell you the truth about him. I've had half a dozen lawsuits filed by neighbors because he killed their dogs. I took him off on this trip and the first thing he did was to kill another dog in a village we went through. That was getting a bit thick. I brought him up in the hills and shot him. It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life; but my friend Kennedy brought him back to life."

He turned with his disarming smile to Kennedy.

"But the other night when he was in the lounge?" asked Kennedy.

"I tried to make you think that he was simply a stray," said MacDonald, shrugging his shoulders. "So I gave him a word and a sign and he went to his corner. I really was through with the poor devil and I knew that he'd found a good master."

There should have been, thought Kennedy, a tremendous tension; the very air should have been alive with fear and suspense now that at last the dog had taken him to the end of the trail. Instead, the easy manner of MacDonald was melting everyone into good-humored acquiescence. He was already starting up the slope with Camilla to change clothes in Seven Mile House.

"Wait a minute. *Wait* a minute," said Fargo.

He looked like a man who is panting with exhaustion, his face faded to yellow, his lips parted, his nostrils distended.

"Let's go up together," said Fargo. "Julie, come along. And you, Kennedy."

"What's the matter?" asked MacDonald.

"We'll just sit down and have a little chat," said Fargo.

MacDonald hesitated an instant but it required a greater annoyance than this to break down his large tolerance. He suddenly was in amiable agreement. "And *you* come," said Fargo to Kennedy.

That was why he found himself walking among his four suspects up the hill; he was entering the hotel with them; with them he was climbing the stairs; it seemed to him that he had half expected before this the suggestion that the talking should be done in the privacy of a bedroom; and actually now MacDonald was inviting them through his door. Kennedy was alone among the four of them, and every one of them, he had some reason to believe, was capable of murder.

CHAPTER XV

NAME THE MURDERER

MAC DONALD'S room was at a corner of the building, looking out on one side across the veranda of the second floor to the hillside and on the other the window held a picture of the ruined mill, the mill dam, a portion of the pond, and the far side of the valley, growing ragged as it climbed toward the mountains.

While Kennedy was taking stock of this, he heard Fargo lock the door behind them as a token that something was to happen before anyone was permitted to leave. But Kennedy continued to dwell on MacDonald. Perhaps he was what he seemed and what he proclaimed himself, simply the innocent master of a dog too devilish to be kept. In that case the night-flight through the trees and the garroting of Naldo were a mystery. Perhaps MacDonald knew that the most extreme danger surrounded him now, but his color had not altered, his eye remained frank and open to look into any face in the room, and above all he still had that smile which was as much a part of him as any physical feature, for it seemed to come from an unalterable content with life as he had found it.

He amused himself, as he often did, by taking out from a vest pocket that small ball of twine and doing with its expanded noose the tricks of a cowpuncher with his rope, making the spinning noose rise and descend, sometimes snagging with it the toe of his shoe, or the knob of a chair's back, until the narrow cord seemed to have a snaky volition of its own.

Through the open windows the air blew warm, and Naldo, lying at his master's feet, still panted from his exertions. MacDonald himself seemed as warm as toast, but Camilla had taken from the couch a woolen throw in which she wrapped herself. She sat in a corner of the couch with her eyes on the floor, almost never lifting them except to view Kennedy with a look of swift, deep malice which troubled him as if an angry voice had spoken his name suddenly in the room. Once or twice her hand touched the almost invisible scratches on her cheek.

Julie Vernon sat in a straight chair close to the hillside window. She wore a dress of thin blue poplin with a yellow cord loosely knotted at her throat. She kept her head high, as usual, and when she smiled there was that slightly impish lift at the corners of the mouth, and yet she was under a heavy strain. Wherever she looked in the room her eyes never could meet those of Kennedy. Everyone including Kennedy was in repose. Only Fargo stirred.

He was so nervous that when he started to roll a cigarette, he dropped the small sack of tobacco and as he leaned Kennedy saw, in the man's coat, the clear imprint of a revolver.

He was taking charge of this odd meeting, and he began by saying: "Everyone here knows that Mrs. Morrel is dead in her room. She was choked with a wire, the sort of wire that's been used to wind the dynamo I've been experimenting with."

No one inside the room made a comment upon this speech but from the guests who were still down beside the pond there came a rattle of laughter and exclamations.

Fargo said: "I want to hear from the man who has been lingering around the toolshed where that fine wire was kept. It was tucked away in a corner. I was the only one who knew about it. Kennedy, I found your footprints all around the shed."

"I thought I saw someone go from the house to the shed," said Kennedy. "I remembered that Harrison's body was there. So I slipped up to the shed and took a look. But there was no one inside."

He only knew the strain Julie had been under by noting how she relaxed. Her eyes found him for the first time.

"That sort of talk doesn't mean much," said Fargo. "But look here. Kennedy arrives and we find that a man has just been killed in a landslide. That same night a woman sleeping in the room next to his, with an unlocked door between, is strangled with a noose of wire taken from the toolshed he's been hanging around. Now what does anybody think?"

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ONLY Fargo looked at him. The rest seemed to be examining their inward thoughts. And this was how it felt to have the gun held under one's nose, thought Kennedy—this shock to the heart and the brain. The sickness and the cold of danger had come to him often enough during the night before but to be in peril of the law itself was a different matter.

He could not help saying: "Very interesting. When the law turns loose against a man, it intends to kill his reputation with his body. It wishes to blot him out. He is erased from the page. A horrible thought, isn't it?"

"And if the law can't do it, there's still Judge Lynch in some parts of the world," said Fargo.

"Ah, I understand," said Kennedy, almost smiling in spite of fear. "You're afraid, Fargo! That's what it is that's working in you."

"I'm afraid?" echoed Fargo, yellow with anger.

"Not for yourself," said Kennedy.

He saw that he had struck with a crushing weight. He saw also that he had almost wished the gun out of hiding and into the hand of Fargo.

"Steady, Danny. Steady, steady!" whispered Julie.

"We ought to go back to the dog and his master," said Kennedy. "You've told us, MacDonald, why you shot Naldo. But you kept running after he came to the house, here. Why did you try to kill him when he was following you through the woods, MacDonald? Why did you use a twist of wire exactly like the one that killed Mrs. Morrel?"

"I?" asked MacDonald. "*I* try to throttle him?"

He relaxed and shook his head. "I held a gun and looked into the poor fellow's eyes just once, with the intention of killing him. That was enough for me."

"As far as Harrison was concerned," said Fargo, "we know MacDonald was on the veranda having coffee with the rest of them."

"That's true," said Camilla.

"What do you say for *yourself?*" asked Fargo of Kennedy.

"I have no motive, you see," answered Kennedy. "I never saw any of these people before. And it's plain that there must have been a motive. Mrs. Morrel came here to see Harrison. They both were killed. Someone disliked the affair between them and destroyed the two of them, Harrison with skill and forethought, Mrs. Morrel without such subtlety because it was necessary to kill her before she talked.

"She was holding something back. She was ready to endure through the night although she was in fear. But behind her locked door and her bolted shutters, she hoped that the murderer would come and try to bargain with her. A whisper through the door, for instance, and a promise of hard cash? Mrs. Morrel was in a position worth definite money, apparently, and she knew it."

Macdonald, rewinding his twine, was about to slip it into his pocket but it escaped from his fingers and rolled across the floor. Kennedy picked it up. The part of the string that had unwound he replaced in order and passed the twine back to its owner.

"It is rather terrible and yet delightful," said Kennedy. "These scattered strands begin to dispose themselves in my hands. They weave into a rope, a hangman's rope, I think. At this moment I cannot be sure. Perhaps all four of you may be combined together. In that case, I am a lost man. But my feeling is that only one is guilty; then three will stand on my side."

"This is talk. This is nothing but damned talk," said Fargo, angrily.

"Go back to the case of Macdonald, because the dog led me to him, at last. Marvelous thought, isn't it, that in spite of Macdonald's wonderful devices, the dog reached him—love found out a way?"

HE SMILED on them. Then he continued: "The motives. We must find those. And we notice that something passed between the eyes of Mrs. Morrel and Macdonald when he entered the lounge last night after she had fainted. Something profoundly important. Something more than recognition, perhaps? You, Miss Cuyas, noticed it, did you not?"

"I noticed nothing," she said in a harsh voice.

"Our affections blind us," said Kennedy. "But ah, don't the rest of you see? Here is Macdonald the mining engineer. That job takes a man often far away from his home. During his journeys, someone came to know his wife. He knew the name, not the man. But with his dog he followed the man Harrison to the place of the assignation.

"Then he had to dispose of the dog because Harrison, who did not know Macdonald by sight, certainly would have seen the dog around the Macdonald house. The dog is shot down, therefore. Then Harrison is disposed of. And still Macdonald has such perfect nerve that he remains on the premises. A sudden disappearance might cause suspicion to follow him. To explain why he stays on and to prove that he still can attract a woman, he begins to pay attention to Miss Cuyas. And unfortunately for him, Mrs. Morrel appears. The second murder must follow."

Macdonald laughed a little.

"I think you do this very well, Kennedy," he said. "Imagination, and a lot of fervor. That's what I like about it. Tell them how you explain me being on the porch when this chap Harrison went west. How did I manage to do him in? Remote control?"

Camilla, turning a bit to Macdonald, opened her eyes and let her soul go out to him. It seemed to Kennedy a beautiful moment, but his hands were busy with a match-box and a rounded flower bowl on the small table. He tipped the bowl and rested the bottom of it, at one side, on the up-ended match-box.

"The control was not very remote," said Kennedy.

He rubbed together thumb and forefinger because of a slight stickiness on them, and he found on the skin a little thread almost exactly like the one which reposed in the folded page of his notebook.

"Not very remote," repeated Kennedy. "A mining engineer who has studied loose ground is the very one who understands how to start a landslide. At the top of the slope those big rocks only needed to be loosened. Then one of them is tipped, ready to fall, except that it is braced on another, smaller stone which is the trigger, one might say, with which that whole buckshot load of stone and shale and loose debris was to be fired down—tons of it—on William Harrison."

"But what pulled the trigger?" demanded Fargo.

"It only needed a slight jerk," said Kennedy.

He tapped the match box. It slipped from under the big glass bowl, which rocked back to a level and spilled water on the top of the table.

"And to give the jerk," said Kennedy, "was easily arranged. It was necessary, first, merely to gauge the approximate time that Harrison would take to walk up into the little cañon. That was not a matter of precision, either, since the landslide would sweep quite a large front.

"So a thin line of cord was strung from the trigger down the hillside—it is not many yards long—and past the house to the side of the veranda. In the evening it would be nearly invisible. And so, as Mr. Macdonald smoked his cigarette at the end of the veranda, when the right time came he took hold of the end of that twine, that well-waxed piece of twine, and gave it the needed pull. Instantly a small sound of thunder began on the opposite side of the hill.

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"William Harrison looked up and saw the ruin pouring down on him. He had barely time for that single look, and then he was gone that vital step away from all of you. There was only one coincidence—that the very stone used as a trigger, knocked headlong by the fall of the large boulder, should have proved to be the missile which struck him first and made death swift, painless. The waxy fuzz of the twine still clung to it on one side; Harrison's blood on the other."

A CHANGE had come in Macdonald so strange that Kennedy hardly recognized him. There was a new look in his eyes, like a fish rising from deep shadows to the light. And his whole face had changed, lengthened, as it were. It came to Kennedy that the alteration was caused by the cessation of the Macdonald smile.

"As a result we shall have to hold you, Macdonald," said Kennedy, "until we've proved or disproved that Mrs. Morrel was your wife."

"Ah well," said Macdonald. "Somehow this grows rather a bore to me."

Camilla Cuyas, as the big fellow turned toward the window, shrugging his shoulders, caught up a hand to her face to shut of the sight of him. She had what Kennedy had seen before, at Seven Mile House—a screaming face while not a sound came from her lips. And yet the ugly tension in her made the very brain of Kennedy ache, as though he had been listening to a piercing cry.

A long, blue-barreled gun slipped into the hand of Fargo.

"We'll have to talk more about this, Macdonald," he said.

And he gave a quick, sidelong glance to Julie Vernon so filled with relief from long continued fear and anxiety that *his* whole story was clear to Kennedy. It had been Julie Vernon that Fargo suspected from the first. He knew, then, the story of her past life, and the part which Harrison had played in it.

"Very well," said Macdonald. "We'll talk it all out."

He added, without looking at the dog:

"Attenzione! Prenda questa posizione. Tenga! Tenga!"

"Look out, Fargo!" called Kennedy, but Morrel had sprung onto the veranda and out of view even as Fargo lifted his gun.

He ran toward the window with the revolver poised. There Naldo blocked the way, silent, but bristling for action and with the green devil in his eyes that Kennedy had seen there before. They heard the heavy step of Morrel cross the veranda, then the crunching noise as he landed on the gravel below. No sound of footfalls followed.

Kennedy jumped back into the hall, ran through it to the veranda, and out to the railing. But there was no sight of a fugitive towards the barn or toward the creek. Morrel seemed to have vanished out of the clear air until Kennedy looked straight down at the ground. There lay Morrel as he had fallen, face down, his arms flung up over his head. There was hardly a stain of blood. A sharp edge of stone had driven to the brain like a spear-point.

A SOUND of bustle filled Seven Mile House. The sheriff had arrived with a deputy and a pair of mules, with a long-handled stretcher slung between them. As for the guests, every one of them was preparing a horrified departure. Kennedy listened to the small sounds from the top of the hill, staring down at the rubble with which the slide had filled the cañon.

Behind him he heard nothing; it was Naldo who turned suddenly, snarling. And then the voice of Fargo said: "You've got the knapsack on your back. Are you sure you're pulling out, Kennedy?"

Kennedy looked at that brown, grim face and shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I stay?" he asked.

"Perhaps the sheriff would want to know about the fellow who saw through all these shenanigans," said Fargo.

"Naldo is the only real witness," answered Kennedy, "and he can't talk, you know."

"There's Julie, then," said Fargo. "Maybe she'd like to talk over some things with you? She seems to think so."

"Some day I'll come back," said Kennedy. "But just now, I'd be like a reminder to her of things we want to forget."

After a moment Fargo said: "I told her it would be this way. She wouldn't believe there was anybody that clean. She wouldn't believe you'd take no advantage. But I guessed."

Kennedy said hastily: "I'm sorry that this is likely to spoil the business of Seven Mile House."

"I'm glad of it," said Fargo. "It'll be a ranch house now, not a damned hotel. A few years of honest use will clean it up in the minds of everybody."

"I'm glad of that," said Kennedy.

"You wouldn't stay a few days?" asked Fargo, rather wistfully.

"I'd better go on. The dog wouldn't he happy where there's so many traces of his master around, and no place to find him. Tell me, Fargo. Had Harrison come here for blackmail?"

"Maybe not," said Fargo. "Maybe it was more to make sure that he could be at home with Mrs. Morrel in a place where people wouldn't tattle on him. They could sneak out of the way, here—him and his woman—and Julie would have to protect them . . . . Are you really moving on now?"

"Yes," said Kennedy, and held out his hand. "You'll be happy with Julie. It's going to be a great marriage."

"All I got to do is hold up my end of things," agreed Fargo. And he added: "Where do you head for, Kennedy?"

"Wherever the dog takes me," said Kennedy.

"But he'll never take you on a trail like the last one, again," said Fargo.

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Kennedy.

"Ah, but do you mean it?" asked Fargo.

"Mean it? I'm ten years older and greyer than I was yesterday!"

"Maybe," said Fargo.

He squinted at Kennedy with long-distance eyes.

Then he said slowly: "But I've spent my own time on trails. I've hunted wolf and deer and bear; but the only trail that counts is a man-trail."

Kennedy gasped.

"Do you think," he said, "that I'd willingly go into this sort of thing again?"

"It ain't a man's will. It's his gifts that lead him along," said Fargo.

And Kennedy remembered it when he was miles away among the hills. The dog no longer pulled back to return toward Seven Mile House and his vanished master. He had entered with Kennedy the circle of a new horizon, but what point of the compass to steer toward Kennedy could not tell. His old plan of a rambling vacation seemed now pointless and foolish. The new man inside him wanted some other goal.

The hills that rolled against the blue sky were no more a temptation or a promise of new worlds beyond them. Something weakened in his heart and urged him to return to Seven Mile House, where he would be sure of a welcome from Julie and Fargo. But he knew that he would have to go on. He had heard a truth which rang a bell in his brain. His destination now was unapparent, but as Fargo had said, his gifts at last would lead him.

THE END

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LEGENDS of the LEGIONARIES

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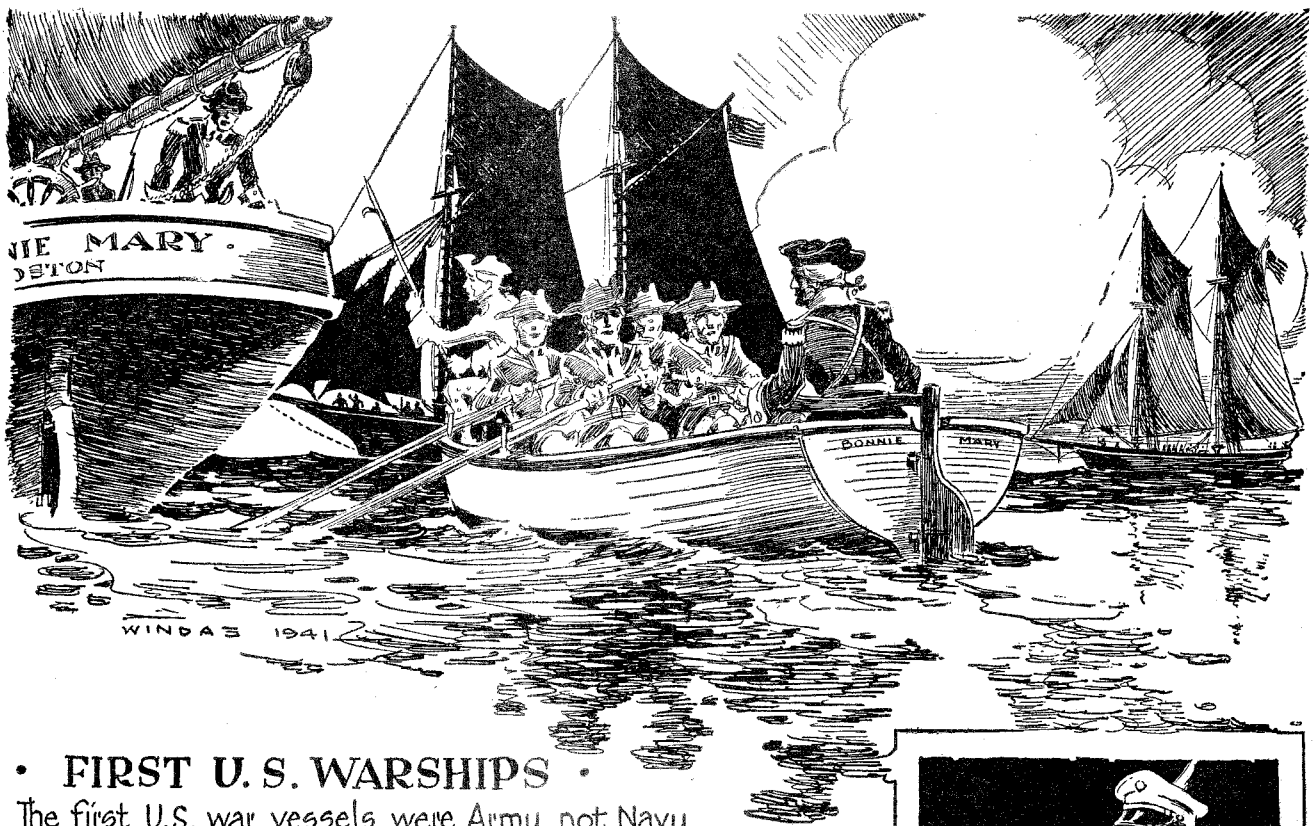

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· SENIOR SERVICE ·

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· ROMAN SIGNALS ·

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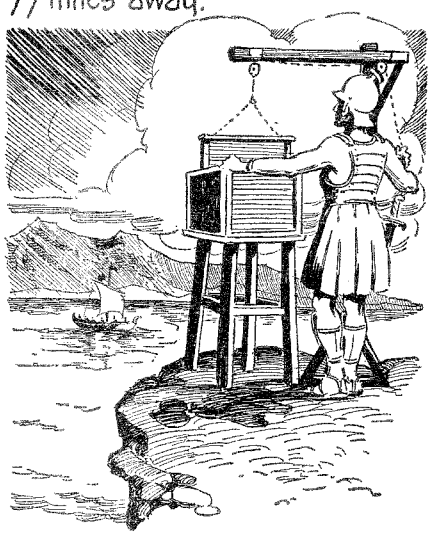

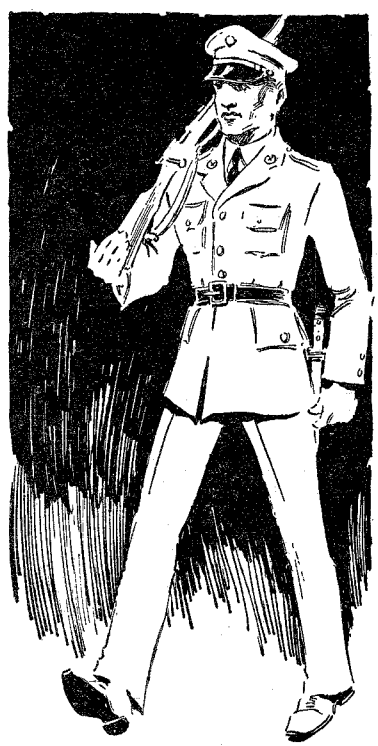

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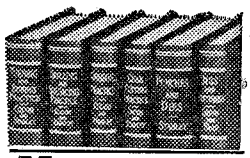

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Argonotes

THIS week two of our correspondents attack with considerable annoyance those sharp-eyed critics who are constantly sending their large and small complaints into this department. Well, there are times, of course, when those complaints seem a bit footling to us; there are times, even, when they get under our skin. But by and large the sniping done by our more querulous readers seems to us a healthy thing.

In the first place, it shows that they're interested, and we'd rather have them be angry than apathetic. Then again, we depend on the readers to help us run ARGOSY; it is published for them, and they should get what they want. So we try to evaluate the comments we get, discounting the smallest gripes, balancing one man's meat against another man's poison. It's not an easy job, but it's a job we've got to do.

Having spoken so lovingly to the sharp-shooters, we will probably get a batch of mail next week that will set us to beating the editorial head against the wall. Anyway, here's a letter to start off with that calls ARGOSY the country's greatest magazine. That's good enough for us.

VICTOR KING

One man's opinions of this country's greatest magazine.

The "slicks" can't compete with ARGOSY as far as entertainment value for men is concerned. The average slick will contain one or possibly two good stories, the rest of the space being devoted to drooling mush and stale articles by pseudo-experts.

ARGOSY gives us *good* novelets and short stories, and lately, her serials (Montgomery, Burroughs, Sale, Beyer) have been tops. I particularly like fantasy, detectives, and adventures with Arthur and Beyer leading in the first, and Sale and Blochman in the second.

Westerns (Yuh kain't do thet tuh me, yuh low-daown hoss-thief) bore me to tears, and Maxwell's smudgy artistry just plain stinks. Don't think I'm advocating a change, though. You may print one story per issue that I don't like, but you can't satisfy everyone a hundred per cent, and you're still batting tops in the league.

Another thing that gripes me is the self-styled literary critic who will write in to tell you your faults and then smugly say, "In spite of this, I will continue to read your magazine." *Himmelherrgottkreuzmillionendonnerwetter!* (With apologies to Bismarck and Ripley). If they don't like your magazine, wyinell do they want to read it?

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Aberdeen, South Dakota

NEXT a letter from a man who has a high regard for ARGOSY but believes that the fact features we have been running lately are a mistake. He wants fiction and nothing else but.

MATTHEW P. KELLY, JR.

After reading some of the tales in Argonotes I know that I am a comparative youngster, but up to now I have found no real complaint to make about ARGOSY, (and I have been reading it for years). But now there has to be a good strong kick as far as I am concerned.

When I want to read current news events I look to *Time* or *News Week* but when I want *fiction* I always have in the past turned to ARGOSY. For Pete's sake junk those halfbaked "true" and "timely" articles before you lose a great many readers like myself.

One thing I would like to know is what happened to the "Dikar" stories? They were great! I had a terrible time getting used to your new format, but now I like it as well as the old. As for the habitual crabbers—why don't they just read the stories for their pleasure instead of trying to see how many mistakes there are in the magazine?

Well, enough of this, but please ask the other readers for their opinion about the "true stories."

Merion, Pa.

MR. KELLY suggests that we ask for further comment on the fact features; and we do so at once. Let us know whether you agree with him or not. These articles are an experiment, and we are extremely anxious to hear how you feel about them.

Here is praise of Steve Fisher.

MEL HERMAN

I think it might be a good idea if once in a while you would run a listing showing which ARGOSY stories are appearing or will shortly appear in book form.

In the Sept. 3rd issue of the Syracuse *Journal* Walter Winchell gives an orchid to Steve Fisher's "Destroyer" which ran serially in ARGOSY some months back. Certainly a fine plug for a good author and a swell story. Let's have more Steve Fisher.

Rochester, N. Y.

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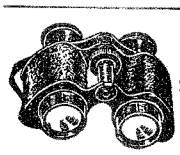

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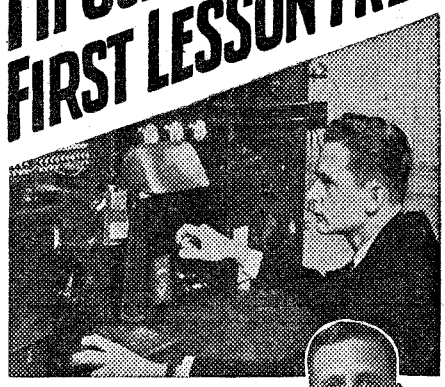

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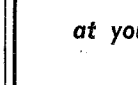

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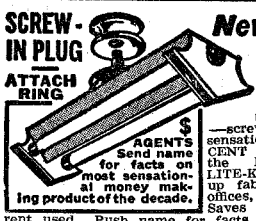

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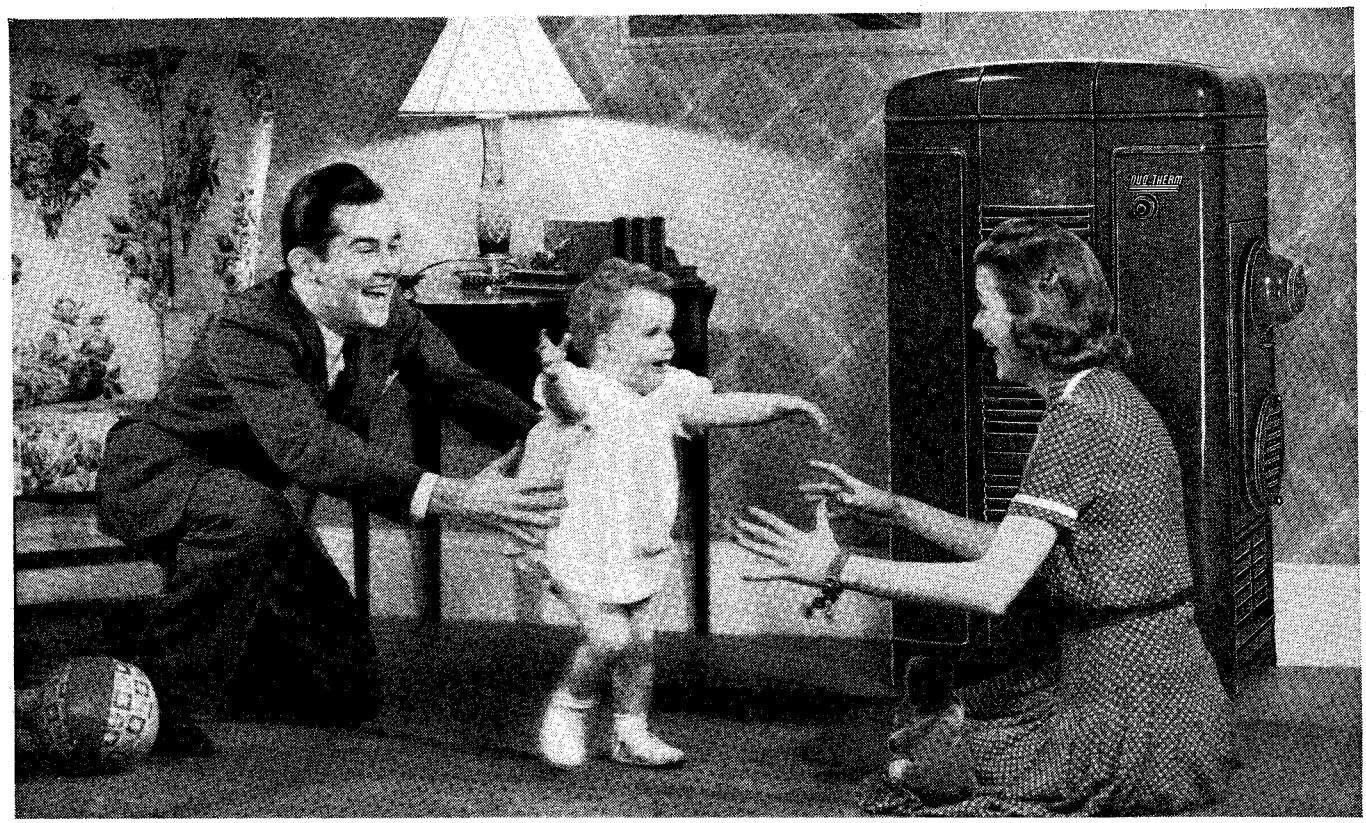

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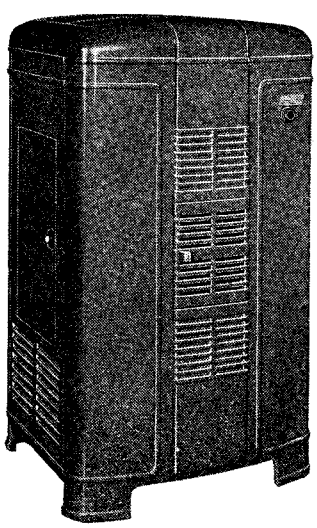

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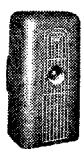

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